

TRENDS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN ETHIOPIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO ARBA MINCH, WOLAITA SODO, HAWASSA, DILLA, AND ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Social science research is widely regarded as a driving force behind economic, social, and political transformation, providing the empirical foundation upon which rational governance and democratic society are built. In Ethiopia, however, the culture of conducting social science research within higher education institutions remains constrained by structural, financial, and policy-related barriers. This study assesses the trends, opportunities, and challenges of social science research in five Ethiopian universities: Arba Minch, Wolaita Sodo, Hawassa, Dilla, and Addis Ababa. Anchored in an interpretivist paradigm and social constructivist assumptions, the study adopted a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through 28 in-depth interviews, 15 focus group discussions, and document review involving officials of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, university research directors, department heads, lecturers, and researchers. Data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that although the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the sampled universities have introduced policies, incentive schemes, and institutional differentiation strategies to strengthen research productivity, social science research remains under-prioritized relative to the natural and applied sciences. Inadequate funding, weak research infrastructure, heavy teaching loads, bureaucratic financial procedures, and limited professional incentives were identified as the principal challenges, while advances in digital research technology, government policy attention, growing numbers of doctoral-qualified staff, and expanding stakeholder collaboration were identified as key opportunities. The study contributes empirical, context-specific evidence on the state of social science research culture in Ethiopian higher education and offers practical recommendations for university administrators, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and researchers seeking to strengthen the research ecosystem.

Keywords: Social Science Research; Higher Education; Research Culture; Qualitative Case Study; Ethiopia

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Universities are expected to generate knowledge that helps societies solve pressing economic, social, and political problems, and social science research plays a central role in that mission. This study examines how five Ethiopian universities Arba Minch, Wolaita Sodo,

Hawassa, Dilla, and Addis Ababa support their researchers in conducting social science research, and what obstacles researchers face in practice. Drawing on interviews and focus group discussions with policymakers, university administrators, and researchers, the study finds that social science research continues to receive less funding, infrastructure, and institutional recognition than research in the natural and applied sciences, even though government policy increasingly emphasizes the importance of research for national development. The findings are useful for university leaders, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, development partners, and researchers who wish to strengthen the environment for social science research in Ethiopia and in comparable developing-country contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Research is a complex, dynamic, and systematic journey toward discovering facts, generating solutions for existing problems, fostering innovation, and modifying the existing body of knowledge for societal betterment (Kumar, 2011). Research is not merely a set of technical skills; it is a way of thinking that examines critically the various aspects of professional and social life, formulates guiding principles, and develops theories that advance a given field of practice (Kumar, 2011). More specifically, social science research involves the systematic investigation of human activity and interaction, addressing the behavior of human beings as members of society and their feelings, responses, and attitudes under different circumstances (Kumar, 2002; Black, 2002). Because economic hardship, political instability, and social crisis remain pressing challenges in the contemporary world, empirical social science research is essential for generating evidence-based solutions to these problems.

Social science research first emerged in Europe as a response to the intellectual and social problems of the medieval era, and Enlightenment scholars such as Immanuel Kant, René Descartes, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill used social inquiry as a means of moving European society from superstition toward reason (Wallerstein, 1999; Magnusson, 1998). While Europe subsequently used social science as a tool of knowledge production with global influence, the diffusion of Western social science disciplines to the Global South has been far more complicated. In Africa, colonial administrations introduced social science disciplines primarily to train local administrators who would serve colonial objectives, largely without regard for the continent's own socio-cultural realities (Rodney, 1973; Mlambo, 2016). Even after independence, many African scholars struggled to decolonize the production of knowledge within their disciplines, leaving social science research on the continent in a comparatively early stage of institutional development.

Ethiopia, although never formally colonized, adopted the ontological and epistemic structure of Western scholarly tradition during the nineteenth century, often without adequately integrating the country's own rich indigenous knowledge systems (Isaac, 2013; Pankhurst, 2010; Yirga, 2017). As in much of the rest of the continent, social science research in Ethiopia remains at a relatively early stage of development and continues to receive comparatively limited policy attention. This is illustrated by the 2008 Professional and Program Mix Policy of Ethiopian Higher Education, which explicitly favored science and technology fields over the humanities and social sciences at a ratio of 70:30 for undergraduate enrollment, signaling a broader policy preference for technological advancement over social scientific inquiry. Ethiopian higher education institutions carry an explicit institutional mandate to produce and disseminate knowledge through

research. Nonetheless, limited research skills and experience have been identified as key barriers to the development of Ethiopia's national research system (Report for the SRIA Programme, 2019). Given this context, questions remain about how social science research is actually practiced on Ethiopian university campuses: what institutional attention it receives, what experiences researchers report, what challenges and opportunities they encounter, and what role various stakeholders play in shaping the research environment. These questions are of direct relevance to university administrators and to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE) as they design policies intended to strengthen national research capacity.

This study addresses this gap by assessing the culture, trends, opportunities, and challenges of social science research at five Ethiopian universities Arba Minch University, Wolaita Sodo University, Hawassa University, Dilla University, and Addis Ababa University. Specifically, the study examines (i) the attention given to social science research by MoSHE and by the sampled universities; (ii) the lived experiences of researchers in conducting social science research; (iii) the principal challenges and opportunities that shape the research environment across the five universities; and (iv) the roles played by different stakeholders in the research process. The originality of the study lies in its comparative, multi-university, qualitative treatment of social science research culture in Ethiopia a context in which most existing accounts of higher education research focus on quantitative research-output metrics rather than on the lived, institutional experience of researchers themselves. By foregrounding the voices of policymakers, administrators, and researchers, the study contributes empirical, context-specific evidence that can inform national research policy, institutional research strategies, and future comparative research on social science culture in developing-country universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is anchored in institutional theory, which holds that organizations, including universities, operate within a broader institutional environment of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures that shape organizational behavior and legitimacy (Scott, 2014). Applied to higher education, institutional theory suggests that the extent to which universities prioritize, resource, and reward social science research is shaped not only by internal academic values but also by external governmental policy, funding regimes, and prevailing beliefs about the relative worth of different scientific disciplines. Firebaugh (2008) further offers seven methodological rules of good social science research avoiding preconceived ideas, seeking differences that make a difference, building in reality checks, replicating findings, comparing like with like, studying change over time, and treating method as the servant rather than the master of inquiry which together provide a normative benchmark against which the research practices described by participants in this study can be interpreted. Taken together, institutional theory and Firebaugh's methodological principles frame social science research culture as the product of an interaction between institutional support structures (policy, funding, infrastructure, incentives) and the epistemic practices researchers use to produce credible knowledge.

Because this study is qualitative and exploratory rather than confirmatory, the following propositions are used as analytical guides for data collection and interpretation rather than as hypotheses to be statistically tested P1: The level of institutional attention given by MoSHE and by individual universities shapes the overall trend of social science research activity, P2: Inadequate funding and weak research infrastructure constrain the volume and quality of social

science research produced, P3: Heavy teaching loads and unattractive research incentives reduce researchers' motivation to engage in social science research relative to teaching or external income-generating activities, P4: Active engagement of stakeholders government, funding agencies, communities, and industry enhances the relevance and societal impact of social science research, P5: Advances in research technology and the growing number of doctorally qualified staff represent emerging opportunities that can strengthen social science research culture despite existing structural constraints.

The conceptual model guiding this study positions institutional attention (policy, funding, and incentive structures at the ministerial and university level) and researcher-level factors (motivation, skills, and workload) as the two primary drivers of social science research culture. These drivers interact with contextual constraints budget limitations, infrastructural deficits, and bureaucratic financial procedures and contextual opportunities technological advancement, stakeholder collaboration, and an expanding pool of doctoral-qualified researchers to produce the observed trends, challenges, and opportunities in social science research across the five case-study universities. This model reflects the institutional-theory assumption that research output is jointly determined by the enabling or constraining conditions of the institutional environment and by the agency of individual researchers operating within it.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to assess the trends, opportunities, and challenges of social science research in Ethiopian higher education. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand the meanings, experiences, and institutional processes underlying social science research culture rather than to test causal relationships among variables (Creswell, 2009). The case study design enabled an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life institutional context, particularly given that the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not always clearly demarcated (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2008). The study is grounded in the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of social constructivism, which holds that the researcher should rely as much as possible on participants' own understanding of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2009). The study was conducted at five Ethiopian universities: Arba Minch University, Wolaita Sodo University, Hawassa University, Dilla University, and Addis Ababa University. These institutions were purposively selected to capture variation in institutional age, research orientation, and geographic location within Ethiopia's higher education system. Data were collected through 28 in-depth interviews and 15 focus group discussions (FGDs) with officials of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, university research and community-engagement directors, department heads, lecturers, and researchers across the social science departments of the five universities, complemented by document review of relevant institutional and government policy materials. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that informants possessed direct knowledge of, and experience with, social science research practice at the ministerial or institutional level (Patton, 2015, as cited in the study's sampling rationale).

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and document review to enable triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Interviews and FGDs explored participants' perceptions of institutional attention to social

science research, their personal experiences conducting research, the challenges and opportunities they encountered, and the roles played by various stakeholders. Document review of MoSHE policy documents and university strategic plans provided contextual corroboration for the interview and FGD data. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the process of familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview and FGD transcripts were coded openly to identify meaningful units of information relevant to the research objectives; codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding, from which higher-level themes were developed. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied data triangulation across interviews, FGDs, and documents, and engaged peer reviewers and professional advisors to minimize interpretive error, consistent with established criteria for credibility, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULT

Characteristics of Data Sources

The study drew on 28 in-depth interviews and 15 focus group discussions conducted across the five case-study universities and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Table 1 summarizes the categories of informants engaged in the study.

Table 1
Summarizes the Categories of Informants Engaged in The Study.

Institution / Body	Informant Category	Interviews	FGDs
Ministry of Science and Higher Education	Ministry officials and experts responsible for research policy	4	—
Addis Ababa University	Lecturers and researchers, including social work department staff	6	3
Hawassa University	Lecturers and researchers from colleges of social science	6	3
Arba Minch University	Lecturers and researchers, College of Social Sciences and Humanities	5	3
Dilla University	Lecturers and researchers, including English, civics, anthropology and sociology departments	4	3
Wolaita Sodo University	Lecturers and researchers engaged in thematic and community-based research	3	3
Total		28	15

Source: Interview and FGD data collected by the researcher, 2023–2024.

Thematic Findings

Theme 1: Institutional Attention to Social Science Research

Participants from MoSHE reported that, although the Ministry has not given social science research the same priority as science and technology fields, it has nonetheless introduced

measures intended to strengthen research productivity across all disciplines, including a national open-access policy, a list of accredited journals, internationalization policies, and training programs on research ethics for social science and humanities researchers. MoSHE has also worked to differentiate the higher education system by classifying universities into research, applied-science, and comprehensive categories, with the intention of channeling institutional missions toward more focused research agendas (Interview, MoSHE officials, 2023).

At the university level, participants generally described attention to social science research as comparatively low, with budget allocations for social science disciplines lagging behind those for the natural and applied sciences, even though administrators recognized social science research as fundamental to informed policymaking and social progress. Universities reported active efforts to diversify research funding by seeking support from non-governmental organizations, government agencies, and philanthropic sources, and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration among social science, natural science, and humanities researchers (Interview, university research directors, 2023).

Theme 2: Researcher Experiences and Motivation

Researchers across the five universities described social science research as intellectually rewarding but practically demanding, requiring strong analytical and critical-thinking skills to navigate the complexity of human behavior, ethical considerations in working with human subjects, and the challenge of translating abstract social concepts into measurable research questions. Several participants noted that universities offer graduate and doctoral training that helps build these skills, but that ongoing professional development in both quantitative and qualitative methods remains limited (FGD, researchers and lecturers, multiple universities, 2023–2024).

A recurring theme across interviews was that researcher motivation is closely tied to the tangible benefits, or lack thereof, associated with conducting research. Participants explained that because social science research yields comparatively low financial return relative to the time and effort it demands, many qualified researchers instead pursue overload teaching or external consultancy work, both of which offer more immediate and predictable income (Interview, lecturers, Addis Ababa and Hawassa Universities, 2023–2024).

Theme 3: Structural and Institutional Challenges

Across all five universities, participants converged on a consistent set of structural challenges limiting social science research. These included inadequate and unevenly distributed funding relative to the natural sciences; cumbersome financial and administrative procedures for accessing approved research budgets; weak research infrastructure, including limited office and common-room space, insufficient computers, and unreliable internet connectivity; heavy overload-teaching burdens that leave little time for research; and, in some cases, broader political and security instability that complicates fieldwork and data collection (Interview and FGD, participants across five universities, 2023–2024).

Methodological constraints were also reported. Participants observed that the dominant reliance on cross-sectional data collection in Ethiopian social science research limits opportunities for causal inference, and that researchers often lack full access to modern statistical and analytical tools, even though robust contemporary statistical procedures could help offset some of these

limitations (Interview, senior researchers, 2023).

Table 2
Summarizes The Principal Challenges and Opportunities Reported
at Each of The Five Case-Study Universities.

University	Principal Challenges Reported	Principal Opportunities Reported
Addis Ababa University	Confusing and inconsistent research procedures; limited match between research-intensive institutional identity and actual research support ecosystem (Addisalem Tebikew Yallew & Dipitso, 2022)	Strong graduate and doctoral training capacity; established social work and related departments actively developing thematic research with students
Hawassa University	Heavy overload-teaching burden; unattractive research incentives relative to overload payments; budget-resettlement delays; low staff salaries; limited transportation and mobility support for fieldwork	Research incentives of up to 15,000 Birr; decentralized financial system; annual research conference; college-based journals; roughly 87% of social science staff pursuing PhDs
Dilla University	Declining staff engagement, particularly in English and civics departments; cumbersome finance procedures; limited budget; national economic inflation	Sustained engagement from anthropology and sociology departments; willingness of stakeholders to collaborate with the university
Wolaita Sodo University	Shortage of budget; weak research infrastructure; limited training budget; limited cooperative research skills	Widely practiced thematic and community-oriented research; supportive government policy; availability of research funders; engaged stakeholders
Arba Minch University	Under-representation of social science research in institutional budget allocation; limited common-room and ICT-lab infrastructure for scholars	Institutional financial support for research (e.g., for the present study); growing institutional emphasis on thematic and adaptive research

Source: Interview and FGD data collected by the researcher, 2023–2024.

Theme 4: The Role of Stakeholders

Participants identified universities, government policymakers, funding agencies, advocacy groups, researchers themselves, communities, non-governmental organizations, and industry actors as the principal stakeholders shaping social science research. Stakeholders were reported to contribute in multiple ways: defining researchable issues, connecting researchers with participants (particularly in sensitive or community-based research), providing financial and logistical resources, and helping translate research findings into actionable policy or program recommendations (Interview and FGD, multiple universities, 2023–2024). At the same time, participants noted a persistent gap between the generation of research findings and their actual use in policymaking, attributing this partly to weak institutional channels for translating research into decisions.

Theme 5: Emerging Opportunities and Current Trends

Despite the challenges identified above, participants described a number of emerging opportunities that could strengthen social science research culture in Ethiopian universities. These include the growing use of digital tools, big data, and artificial intelligence in social research, which participants viewed as improving the speed and accuracy of data analysis (Sharma, 2025); the increasing adoption of mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative and quantitative techniques; growing openness to participatory and community-based research; and heightened institutional attention to research ethics and data transparency. Participants also highlighted growing numbers of doctoral-qualified staff, an expanding network of accredited journals, and the establishment of the Ethiopian Science Academy as encouraging institutional developments (Interview, university researchers, 2023–2024). At the same time, participants cautioned that financial and institutional constraints, high costs of data collection, and the risk of political influence on research agendas remain significant obstacles to fully realizing these opportunities (Sharma, 2025).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with the study's institutional-theory framing: social science research culture in Ethiopian universities appears to be shaped less by the intrinsic capacity or motivation of individual researchers than by the broader institutional environment within which they operate (Scott, 2014). The comparatively low budgetary priority given to social science research relative to the natural and applied sciences, reflected in Ethiopia's 2008 Professional and Program Mix Policy, mirrors patterns described in other developing-country contexts, where social science disciplines have historically received less institutional legitimacy and resourcing than the natural sciences (Kumar, 2002; Bhandari, 2023). This pattern is not unique to Ethiopia; it echoes concerns raised in the broader literature that social research worldwide has not always been properly invested in, despite its recognized value for interpreting and addressing complex social phenomena (Thuy, 2022).

The finding that heavy teaching loads and weak financial incentives discourage sustained engagement in social science research is consistent with Firebaugh's (2008) observation that methodological rigor in social science depends on researchers being able to prioritize careful, iterative inquiry a condition that is difficult to sustain when researchers face competing demands on their time and inadequate compensation for research activity. Similarly, the persistent gap between generating research findings and using them for policymaking, reported by participants across all five universities, reflects a broader challenge documented in comparative research on higher education institutions in African contexts, where research-oriented institutional identities are not always matched by research ecosystems conducive to translating findings into practice (Addisalem Tebikew Yallew & Dipitso, 2022).

At the same time, the study's findings on emerging opportunities growing use of digital and AI-enabled research tools, expanding doctoral training, and increasing stakeholder engagement suggest that Ethiopian universities are not merely passive recipients of institutional constraint but are also actively adapting to a changing global research landscape (Sharma, 2025). This is consistent with the view that social science research, even where historically under-resourced, retains the capacity to evolve methodologically and institutionally when supported by targeted policy attention (Black, 2002; Kumar, 2011). The comparative university-level findings

presented in Table 2 further suggest that institutional context matters: universities with more decentralized financial systems and dedicated research incentives, such as Hawassa University, reported comparatively more favorable research conditions than universities facing more centralized or constrained financial procedures. This lends support to Proposition 1, that the level of institutional attention shapes the overall trend of social science research activity, while the funding- and infrastructure-related challenges reported across all universities support Proposition 2.

Finally, the finding that stakeholder engagement from government agencies to community members enhances the relevance and practical uptake of social science research (Proposition 4) reinforces the argument that social science research is most effective for societal problem-solving when it is embedded within a network of institutional relationships, rather than conducted in isolation from the communities and policymakers it is meant to serve (Kumar, 2002; Stake, 2008). Together, these findings suggest that strengthening social science research culture in Ethiopian higher education will require coordinated action at multiple institutional levels from national policy reform to university-level budget prioritization to department-level workload management rather than intervention at any single level alone.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to assess the trends, opportunities, and challenges of social science research at five Ethiopian universities. The findings show that while MoSHE and the sampled universities have introduced policies, incentive schemes, and institutional differentiation strategies intended to strengthen national research capacity, social science research continues to receive comparatively limited budgetary and infrastructural priority relative to the natural and applied sciences. Researchers across all five universities reported that inadequate funding, weak research infrastructure, heavy teaching loads, and cumbersome financial procedures constrain their ability to conduct sustained, high-quality research, even as they recognized emerging opportunities associated with digital research tools, growing doctoral training capacity, and expanding stakeholder engagement.

The study contributes to the literature on social science research culture in developing-country higher education by providing comparative, multi-university, qualitative evidence from an Ethiopian context that has been comparatively underexamined in existing scholarship. Academically, the findings extend the application of institutional theory to the study of research culture in African higher education, showing how ministerial policy, university-level resourcing, and researcher-level motivation interact to shape research output. Practically, the findings offer several recommendations. First, universities should expand structured research training to help researchers produce higher-quality, publishable research. Second, universities and MoSHE should increase the research budget allocated to social science disciplines to bring it closer to parity with the natural and applied sciences. Third, the role of stakeholders government, funding agencies, and communities in shaping and using research should be more deliberately strengthened. Fourth, MoSHE should continue to expand policy attention to social science research as a contributor to solving Ethiopia's social, economic, political, educational, and health challenges. Fifth, the specific structural challenges identified in this study bureaucratic financial procedures, weak infrastructure, and heavy overload-teaching burdens should be addressed directly by university administrations. This study is limited by its qualitative, case-study design, which, while offering

analytical depth, may not fully capture the diversity of research practices across Ethiopia's broader higher education sector. Future research could usefully extend this inquiry through comparative quantitative analysis of research output and funding across a larger sample of Ethiopian universities, or through longitudinal qualitative research tracking how recent policy reforms affect social science research culture over time.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.S.A.; methodology, A.S.A.; formal analysis, A.S.A.; investigation, A.S.A.; data curation, A.S.A.; writing original draft preparation, A.S.A.; writing review and editing, A.S.A. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review procedures followed the research ethics guidelines of Arba Minch University. The study involved voluntary interviews and focus group discussions with adult participants regarding institutional research practices, without collecting sensitive personal, medical, or legally protected information.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used an AI-based language model to assist with structuring the manuscript according to journal formatting requirements, language refinement, and reference formatting. After using this tool, the author reviewed, verified, and edited all content and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest. The funder had no role in the design of the study, the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data, the writing of the manuscript, or the decision to publish the results.

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