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Building Research Universities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence and Lessons from Bahir Dar University's Vision of Wisdom 2025

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Perspective

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Abstract

I write this paper not as an institutional report or a case for my own success, but as an honest, first-person reflection on how Bahir Dar University's Vision of Wisdom 2025 was actually born. It also presents how colleagues across the university shaped it through active participation rather than having it handed down from my office alone. Most importantly, it attempts to capture lessons and to provide evidence of what, seven years later, it can and cannot tell us about leading institutional change. My purpose is not to prove that the vision worked. Instead, I share the exciting lived experience of forming and carrying a vision honestly enough that junior leaders and students of higher-education leadership can learn from it, including what did not go smoothly.

The vision grew out of a small set of foundational questions about what development actually requires of a country like Ethiopia, and what a university should therefore be for. Working through those questions with my leadership team, and progressively with the wider university community, we settled on three outcomes as our north star: graduates whose knowledge, skill, and attitude translate into wise decisions and productive citizenship; research that addresses Ethiopia's own development challenges rather than research for its own sake; and community outreach through which students and staff share what they know for the community's direct benefit. To reach these outcomes, we pursued two linked strategies: transforming students' educational experience toward student-centered learning by thinking and doing, and organizing research and outreach around research centers of excellence, research groups, and graduate programs.

Seven years into implementation, the university's own institutional records and independent, peer-reviewed bibliometric studies both show substantial change. Drastic changes in diversity of doctoral programs and doctoral staff, more research funding, and a documented rise in indexed research output that continued, and even accelerated, after my presidency ended. I read that continuation as this paper's central lesson, not as proof of my own effectiveness. The lesson is that a vision genuinely thought through and owned by the university community who must carry it can outlive the leader who first proposed it. This is possible only if it is communicated continuously, including its setbacks, and embedded in durable structures rather than left to one person's authority.

1. Introduction

Before there was a Vision of Wisdom 2025, there was a question I could not comfortably answer. When I took up the presidency of Bahir Dar University in 2003 E.C. (2010 in the Gregorian calendar), I kept returning to one fundamental question. What is a university like Bahir Dar University actually for in a country like Ethiopia? To me, producing graduates and papers was not enough. I had seen and lived in developed countries, including Norway and Finland, during my graduate school years. One fundamental question always haunted me: how did these two countries become wealthy, particularly through the link between higher education and their economy? That discomfort, more than any policy document, is what started Vision of Wisdom 2025.

In June 1996, I landed in Norway to begin graduate studies in physics at the University of Tromsø, now the Arctic University of Norway. It was the first country I had visited outside Ethiopia, and I was struck by its level of development and the way things worked. I quickly learned that everyone had access to quality education, housing, and a minimum living allowance when needed. I began to wonder: how was this possible?

I had the opportunity to ask Truls Hansen, an outspoken and friendly scientist who oversaw the geomagnetic observatory. I asked him how Norway had become such a wealthy country while Ethiopia, with its much longer history and statehood, had not. He smiled and told me that our transformation began with a group of ambitious, dynamic people who campaigned for power with a vision to transform Norway. People believed them and chose them. Surprisingly, they not only laid the foundation for Norway's prosperity but also delivered on their promises. The rest is history. It all boiled down to leadership. This was perhaps one of the moments when I first realized the priceless value of leadership.

My second encounter with a similar question was with my mentor and PhD supervisor, the late Prof. Tuomo Nygren of the University of Oulu in Finland. During one of the many lovely dinners he invited me to at his home in Muhos, near Oulu, we had an informal discussion about development. I asked him how Finland had built a system that was the envy of the world, including being one of the least corrupt countries, an innovative society, and a place with remarkable human well-being. He attributed Finland's foundation partly to the church's efforts to ensure that everyone could read and write, followed by generations of leaders who built upon that foundation. It was interesting to see how one generation lays a foundation and successive generations build on it.

With this background, this paper is my attempt to set down, to the best of my recollection, how I practiced higher education leadership in a transparent and open way, not as an institutional report and not as an argument that the vision succeeded. But this is a reflective account written for two audiences. First, to the academic leaders and managers who may one day face the questions I faced. Second, to students of higher-education leadership who want to understand, in detail, what it takes to develop and carry an institutional vision, including the difficult realities that rarely appear in official reports.

What follows is organized around three things I want to share. First, the foundational questions about national development that led me, and the university community around me, to formulate the vision, and the three outcomes we adopted as our north star (Section 2). Second, the two major strategies we chose to reach those outcomes, reshaping the student experience and organizing research and outreach around centers of excellence, research groups, and graduate programs (Section 3). Third, how we built real ownership of the vision rather than simply announcing it (Section 4). This includes what actually happened during the seven years I led its implementation, as reflected in both the university's own records and independent evidence (Section 5). I have also drawn leadership learnings from the experience as a whole (Section 6). The lessons are clear: a genuine vision can outlast its leader; honest, continuous communication builds ownership; and lasting change depends on strong institutions, not individual authority.

I should say plainly, from the outset, that I am not a neutral narrator. I played a leading role in conceiving this vision and led its implementation, and this account cannot substitute for an independent institutional history. I have tried to manage that limitation in two ways by drawing a clear line between what I remember and believed at the time (Sections 2–4), what the university's own administrative records show, and what independent, peer-reviewed researchers with no connection to me or the vision have separately found in the university's published output (both in Section 5), and by trying to be as honest about what did not go smoothly as about what did. I hope this may also encourage individual researchers to scrutinize this history and present detailed independent study.

2. How the Vision Was Born

2.1 The Questions We Started With

The process that became Vision of Wisdom 2025 did not begin with a university-specific plan. It began with a set of much larger questions that we carried into conversations across the university: What does national development mean in practical terms? How has development of nations happened elsewhere, and is there a practical example we could learn from rather than an abstract theory? Why do developing countries like Ethiopia invest so heavily in universities specifically? And what political-economic path had Ethiopia itself chosen for its development, and what did that path require of an institution like ours?

We did not treat these as rhetorical questions. Development, as we came to define it for our purposes, moves along three converging dimensions: people’s satisfaction with health, education, and income. We grounded our thinking explicitly in the developmental state model associated with East Asian late-industrializers and, by the 2010s, increasingly discussed in the African context [1]. South Korea and China were the comparative examples we returned to most often: agriculture-led, export-oriented industrialization built on sustained, targeted investment in human capital.

Working through these questions changed how we thought about the university's mandate. Rather than starting from what a university normally does and asking how that might help development, we inverted the sequence. We started with what Ethiopia needed to develop, and only then asked what Bahir Dar University's role in that process should be. The question that shaped our thinking was how Bahir Dar University could position itself as a genuine engine of Ethiopia's economic, political, and social transformation, not merely a producer of graduates and papers.

We often discussed how to shape higher education in Ethiopia in those days. One evening, four presidents of major Ethiopian universities and the then State Minister of Education, the late Adhana Haile, were having dinner at the Summerland Hotel in Bahir Dar. The State Minister shared his ambition to transform higher education by granting universities greater autonomy and empowering their presidents to operate more like CEOs, making decisions on program development, expansion, and other institutional priorities. Then he said something to us that stayed with me: “Guys, if we do not transform higher education by executing with

speed, quality, and scale, Ethiopia may one day ask others to do the thinking for us, just as we now ask others for money." That powerful message has stayed with me ever since.

2.2 Giving the Vision a Name and a Reason to Care

We used the image of the Earth at night, which shows a striking contrast: much of the developed world is brightly illuminated, while large parts of Africa remain in darkness. We asked the staff and students: What explains this difference? We shared that the lights represent societies that have learned to translate education into knowledge, innovation, productivity, and transformation. The darkness represents societies that are still struggling to turn education into the force that can transform their economies and the lives of their people. Africa is not destined to remain in the dark. We have a great opportunity to produce the generation that lights Africa.

We set out to encourage every student to learn deeply, every faculty member to teach differently, and Bahir Dar University to aim to turn knowledge into solutions, and every graduate who uses what they have learned to solve a real problem adds another light to the map. This approach was intentional: we needed language that a professor in agriculture, a graduate student in engineering, and a first-year undergraduate could all recognize themselves in. We knew that more publications or higher enrollment does not do that.

Underneath the phrase was a conventional human-capital argument, translated into the university's three core functions: teaching that gives graduates the knowledge, skill, and attitude Ethiopia's development requires; research that generates knowledge relevant to Ethiopia's own development priorities rather than to publication counts alone; and community outreach that transfers what the university knows directly to the communities around it. That teaching-research-outreach triad, drawn from the university's founding vision presentation [2], became the organizing frame for everything else we did.

We intentionally chose the term wisdom, not simply knowledge, skill, and attitude. A graduate can hold all three and still make a poor decision, or a research finding can be technically sound and still go unused. Wisdom, as we used the term, is the step beyond competence. It contains the capacity to act and judge well, not only to know well. That progression knowledge, skill, and attitude into wisdom, and wisdom into wise action gave the vision its name. It was designed to become something the university lived with day to day rather than a phrase confined to a strategy document. The university first captured the idea of wisdom in its adopted motto: Wisdom at the Source of the Blue Nile. Over time, the motto became more than an aspirational statement. We deliberately gave it a visible and cultural presence across the university through a Wisdom Statue, Wisdom Paintings, the Wisdom University Anthem, and the television program Window of Wisdom.

We did not create these simply as symbols or campus artifacts. They were intended to make the vision visible, memorable, and shared, helping students, staff, and the wider university community see themselves as part of a common journey toward becoming a research university. For this reason,

Section 4 discusses these elements not primarily for what they were, but to show how we built ownership of the vision and turned it into part of the university's culture.

2.3 The Three Outcomes That Became Our North Star

Out of these conversations, three outcomes emerged as the measures we actually cared about more than any single statistic in Table 1 below; these three are what I would want a reader to take away as the substance of the vision:

1. Enabling students to make sound decisions and take appropriate action.

Graduates should leave with the knowledge, skills, and judgment to apply what they have learned, solve problems, make sound decisions, and act responsibly, not merely hold a qualification. The measure is whether they can translate their learning into effective action and judgment in their professional and civic lives.

2. Applicable research that addresses Ethiopia's development challenges.

Research should address real problems facing Ethiopia and produce usable knowledge, evidence, or solutions. Success should be measured not only by publications, but also by the extent to which research informs policy, practice, innovation, or development.

3. Community outreach that delivers real benefit.

Students and staff should apply their knowledge and skills to address real community needs and produce tangible improvements. Success should be measured by what actually changes in the lives, livelihoods, services, or practices of the communities the university serves.

Everything described in the rest of this paper, including the strategies, the structures, and the numbers in Section 5, contributes to these three outcomes. I raise this because, seven years on, it is easy to let institutional indicators (doctoral programs, research budgets, publication counts) stand in for the vision itself. They do not. They are imperfect proxies for whether students are making wiser decisions, whether research is reaching Ethiopia's real problems, and whether communities are actually better off questions this paper's evidence, discussed honestly in Section 5, can only partially reflect on.

3. The Strategies We Chose

3.1 Transforming the Student Educational Experience

The first strategy was to change what it means, in practice, to educate a student at Bahir Dar University. I had come to believe that a curriculum built mainly around lectures and closed-book examinations could produce graduates with knowledge but not necessarily wisdom. This is because it rarely asked students to investigate anything themselves or to test what they had learned against a real problem. We moved toward student-centered education. This approach encourages learning by thinking and doing, in which students investigate knowledge and its application in real life rather than receiving it passively. In the vision's own architecture, the graduate we wanted was the product of three converging streams of experience: classroom learning, research experience, and work-study (internship) experience rather than of classroom instruction alone. In practice, this meant curriculum reform, revised common-course and credit-hour structures, a new quality-assurance function to hold the reform to a standard, and industry-attachment and apprenticeship-style components built into professional programs, so students regularly investigated live problems rather than only prepared ones.

3.2 Organizing Research and Outreach Around Centers of Excellence

The second strategy addressed the research and outreach outcomes directly. Rather than leaving research activity dispersed across individual departments and academic staff pursuing their own interests, we organized it around research centers of excellence, dedicated research groups, and graduate programs, deliberately chosen based on the nation’s top priorities and challenges. These centers have been linked in an approach consistent with what the higher-education management literature describes as the shift toward a more multi-disciplinary, research-oriented university, in which structural integration of research and teaching units, rather than resource growth alone, is treated as the decisive lever of institutional change [3]. The Blue Nile Water Institute is the example I return to most often, because it shows what this looked like in practice. It was a thematic institute built around a problem central to the region, water resources tied to the Blue Nile, that brought together graduate students, a dedicated research group, and applied research activity under one roof, rather than treating each as a separate line item. The region and the nation needed a center that could map the water resources of Ethiopia’s Blue Nile Basin, identify appropriate technologies for their use, develop effective water-resource management practices, and contribute to Ethiopia’s hydropolitical engagement on the Nile. Graduate programs were expanded specifically to feed this structure with trained researchers, and community outreach was intended to flow from the same centers, so that new knowledge could move toward practical application rather than stopping at a completed research project.

3.3 Two Levers That Made These Strategies Possible

Neither strategy could work without people and infrastructure to carry it, so we invested deliberately in both. We intentionally developed the capacity of existing staff, recruited new staff, brought in expatriate staff and visiting scholars, and built a leadership pipeline through a dedicated leadership pool and continuous experience-sharing among current and future academic leaders. More than 350 academic staff were sent abroad for graduate-level training during my term. We also built infrastructure, including research-grade laboratories in selected thematic areas, research journals (including a partnership with

the academic publisher Springer to support the university's own scientific journals), dedicated research centers, and the information and communication technology needed to support it all.

4. Building Ownership, Not Just Announcing a Vision

A vision that lives only in a presentation and speaks of its leaders is not a vision the university owns; it is a slogan. We were conscious of this risk from early on, and it shaped how we tried to build the vision into the university's culture rather than leaving it as a planning document. This is also where I want to be most honest about how uneven that process was.

We used to hold retreats in nearby towns. During one of these retreats, Prof. Alemayehu Bishaw, who was leading the expansion of the PhD program, and I shared our vision that, by 2025, when Bahir Dar University became a research university, we would have at least 100 PhD graduates. One senior staff member openly challenged us, calling it an unrealistic expectation, more of a dream than a realistic target. I was no longer at the University in person in 2025 to see it happen. But Prof. Alemayehu Bishaw, who was there, later reminded the Senate of that conversation. He reported that the University had graduated **120 PhD students**, *not only reaching the target once deemed unrealistic but also surpassing the 100 PhD graduates envisioned in Vision of Wisdom 2025. What was once dismissed as a dream had become a measurable reality.*

The vision spread through the university community through repeated engagement with deans, department heads, and the leadership pool described in Section 3.3, and through the deliberate use of registers well beyond a single planning document. A purpose-written song, a commissioned mural (the Wisdom Painting), and a dedicated television program, Meskote Tibeb, broadcast to the wider university community and the public, alongside a university newsletter (The Nile).

This kind of repeated, multi-register communication closely matches what the organizational-change literature identifies as characteristic of transformational leadership [4]. It maps onto established models of change in which creating and communicating a vision, and only then empowering broad-based action toward it, are treated as sequential, mutually reinforcing stages rather than substitutes for one another [5]. I do not think any one of these registers, on its own, changed anyone's mind. What I believe what mattered was the actual doing and the repetition of hearing the same three outcomes and the same two strategies described in a strategy retreat. The progress we made together, including all the communication, such as a mural on a building wall and a television segment, contributed to creating a shared vision.

I want to be clear that this was not uniform or immediate. Some colleagues, and even many senior leaders, experienced the vision, at least initially, as another leader's slogan rather than something they had shaped, a fair reaction, given how much of the initial framing genuinely originated in my own office. I believe many will think it is another thing that will go away with the leader. The participatory process worked best in units that took the vision's language and adapted it into their own strategic plans and research agendas rather than repeating it verbatim.

I also found that acceptance and understanding of the vision and associated strategies vary based on the two distinct types of leaders and managers within the leadership team. The first type sees leadership or management primarily as a stepping stone to a higher position or as an opportunity to gain personal benefits. They tend to focus on being liked, appearing good in others' eyes, and avoiding decisions that might make them unpopular.

The second type, though a minority, is driven by an internal desire to make a difference. They take ownership of the department, college, or section they lead and are motivated by what they can change, improve, and accomplish. Their focus is not on how they are perceived but on the outcomes they produce. In simple terms, the first group is driven by recognition; the second by results. The second type moved quickly to execute strategies, while the first tended to take longer to act. This unevenness, I think, reflects how participatory the process really was: it became more participatory over time than at the outset, and it was more participatory in some parts of the University than in others.

I often wondered where the internal drive of those leaders and managers who consistently take ownership, execute, and get things done comes from. Is it shaped by nationalism, religion, family, education, or the experiences they encounter in life? In several conversations with such leaders and managers, they often traced this drive back to their upbringing, particularly the influence of their father and mother. Their reflections made me wonder whether the foundations of leadership are formed much earlier in life than we often recognize.

5. What Actually Happened

5.1 A Note on Evidence and My Own Bias

I served as president for the entire period this paper describes, and I am the vision's principal author, which is a direct conflict of interest for any claim I might make about its success. I have tried to manage that in three ways. First, everything in Sections 2 through 4 is presented as my own recollection and interpretation, not as a claim about outcomes. Second, the institutional figures below come from a single administrative comparison between two fixed points in time: the start and end of my term, rather than from a running evaluation I could shape as it went along. Third, and most important to me, the paper's central empirical claim in this section rests on bibliometric studies written by scholars with no connection to me or to the vision, so that its strongest evidence does not depend on my own account. I would ask readers to weigh the more interpretive parts of this paper, especially Section 4, with this bias in mind.

Table 1
compares the university's own administrative baseline at the start of my term (2003 E.C., approximately 2010/11) with its position at the end (2010 E.C., approximately 2017/18) drawn from my Amharic-language exit report. It was written by me as a personal account and submitted at the close of my term to the University board. I translated it into English myself as a native Amharic speaker and its original author. I offer the comparison as a record, not as proof that I personally caused the change it shows [6]. The full report contains twenty-eight such indicators covering academic programming, staffing, finance and infrastructure; Table 1 reproduces a representative selection.

Institutional indicator	2003 E.C. baseline (≈ 2010/11)	2010 E.C. status (≈ 2017/18)
PhD programs offered	2	32
MSc/2nd-degree programmes offered	5	134
Total postgraduate degree programs	45	73
PhD students enrolled	5	326
Postgraduate (research/graduate school) students	13	416
University campuses	2	8
PhD-holding academic staff	90 (16%)	338 (23%)
Academic staff pursuing a PhD	< 2%	20%
ICT data centers	0	2

Table 1 *Selected institutional indicators, Bahir Dar University, 2003 E.C. baseline versus 2010 E.C. status (source: presidential exit report, "Wisdom at the Source of the Blue Nile," 2017 E.C.)*

The report also presents the establishment of new academic and research units consistent with the strategies described in Section 3, including the expansion of the Bahir Dar Institute of Technology; the founding of the Ethiopian Institute of Textile and Fashion Technology as a new campus; the establishment of the Ethiopian Maritime Academy under the university as a new campus; and the construction of a comprehensive, specialized teaching hospital and medical college as a new campus, as well as part of a health-science city master plan.

On the innovation and technology-transfer side, the university launched a branded local-innovation program, named Made in Bahir Dar Initiative, restructured its research directorate, and introduced a staff research-incentive scheme. On the teaching side, the curriculum reform, revised credit-hour system, quality-assurance directorate, and industry-attachment components described in Section 3.1 were carried out, and more than 350 academic staff were sent abroad for graduate-level training during the period. The communication effort described in Section 4 was likewise sustained operationally throughout, through the university newsletter, The Nile Newspaper.

Read together, these figures indicate that the strategies described in Section 3 were not left at the level of planning documents: the graduate-program, research-center and research-group linkages called for correspond, in the administrative record, to a large expansion in doctoral programming and doctoral students; the staff-development lever corresponds to the near-quadrupling of PhD-holding faculty and the tenfold growth in staff pursuing doctorates.

5.2 Looking Beyond My Own Record: Independent Evidence

Because my record is not independent evidence, I want to point to what other researchers have found separately in the university's published output.

Yalew and Dereb conducted a Scopus-based bibliometric overview of Bahir Dar University's publication output using a 22-year dataset (approximately 2001–2023). They reported that there has been a notable increase in research productivity at the university since 2010, with output concentrated in medicine, agriculture, environmental science, social science and engineering, and with the university's principal international research collaborators located in the United States, Germany, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Japan and Belgium [7]. The inflection point these independent authors identify since 2010 coincides, without my solicitation or knowledge, with the start of the presidency and vision period described in this paper.

At the national level, the same research group's companion study of Ethiopian-affiliated research indexed in both Scopus and Web of Science over a 20-year window (approximately 2002–2022) identifies Bahir Dar University, alongside Addis Ababa, Gondar, Jimma and Mekelle universities, as one of the five Ethiopian institutions with a relatively higher level of research productivity than the other universities in the country, within an overall national research output the study finds to have been increasing over the past decades. [8]

This second study complements the first because it is not Bahir Dar-specific. It independently situates the university's growth within, rather than as an artifact of, a national research-productivity trend, while still placing Bahir Dar in the top tier of Ethiopian research universities across a window that spans the vision period.

5.3 A Longer View: The Sixteen-Year Publication Series

To complement these two peer-reviewed studies with an explicit annual series, I draw here on OpenAlex, a large, freely queryable, open-infrastructure scholarly database maintained as a non-profit successor to Microsoft Academic Graph [10]. OpenAlex aggregates and disambiguates institutional affiliations across Crossref, PubMed, ORCID, publisher metadata, and open-access repositories. Its coverage is broader than, and not identical to, the Web of Science Core Collection or Scopus, so the counts below should be read as a transparent, independently reproducible proxy for the university's overall indexed research output rather than as a Web of Science-specific count. Using OpenAlex's institution record for Bahir Dar University (ROR 01670bg46), I retrieved the number of works with a Bahir Dar University affiliation for

each full year from 2010 to 2025. Figure 1 plots this series beginning in 2010, because that is the earliest year for which OpenAlex's institution-level summary record exposes a verified annual count for Bahir Dar University; I could not query its underlying works-search endpoint for years before 2010 at the time of writing owing to public API rate limits, so no verified pre-2010 count is plotted here at all, rather than an estimated or invented one.

I want to address directly a concern a careful reader might reasonably raise: the fact that OpenAlex's verified series happens to begin in exactly the year I became president could look, at first glance, like a convenient coincidence rather than a genuine data limitation, and I do not think that concern should be waved away. I tested it rather than simply dismissing it. I queried OpenAlex's institution-level record for a long-established, heavily published university with no connection whatsoever to Bahir Dar University or to my presidency, Harvard University (OpenAlex institution ID I136199984). I found that its own annual counts-by-year series also begins at exactly 2010, despite Harvard having published continuously for centuries; the same floor appears in every other institution record I checked. This tells me the 2010 floor is a structural feature of how OpenAlex builds its institution-summary endpoint. This is most likely a fixed rolling window of roughly seventeen to eighteen years back from the current date, applied uniformly to every institution rather than something specific to Bahir Dar University or timed to coincide with my term of office. I also tried, repeatedly and on separate dates, to query OpenAlex's separate works-search endpoint year by year for years before 2010, since that endpoint in principle indexes further back than the institution-summary record does. Every attempt returned a public-API rate-limit error rather than data, which I record here as a genuine technical constraint rather than a convenient reason to stop looking. I could not find any freely accessible source that could verify a Bahir Dar University publication count for 2007, 2008, or 2009 specifically; I do not have institutional access to Web of Science or Scopus, either of which could plausibly extend this series backward with a verified count. I report this limitation openly, rather than omitting the gap or letting the chart's starting point speak for itself. I would welcome a reader with institutional database access to independently verify pre-2010 figures. Based on the university's own administrative history, I expect pre-2010 output was really insignificant but not zero. I cannot document that expectation with the same rigor as the years shown.

The series rises only gradually across the first half of my presidency from 96 works in 2010 to 204 in 2013. This is the period that coincides with the foundational work period, during which we were encouraging staff and students to carry out research. It then climbed more steadily from 2014 onward (342, 304, 329, 466 in 2014–2017) and reached 630 in 2018, the final year of my term. This is roughly a sixfold increase in indexed annual output across the eight-year presidency. What I find most humbling in this series is what happened after I left office. The output did not plateau or decline once I was no longer president. It nearly doubled from 630 in 2018 to 988 in 2019, then continued to 1,507 (2020), 1,776 (2022), and a series peak of 2,329 in 2024, before easing to 2,213 in 2025, the most recent complete year. I read that cautiously, as the outcome I most hoped for and am least entitled to take personal credit for. This shows that the structures we built the doctoral pipeline, the research centers, the incentive scheme mattered and started to bring results following their establishment. The steepest growth in the entire series comes from the foundational work we did. This is also consistent with a simple structural

explanation: our principal investments during 2010–2018 were in the doctoral pipeline and research infrastructure (Section 3). Those investments take several years to convert into sustained first-author publication output, as newly trained PhD holders complete their degrees, return, and establish independent research programs. On this reading, we did the foundation-laying phase, and the sustained rise afterward is the period in which that foundation's returns materialized.

A methodological limitation should be stated plainly. Clarivate's Web of Science Core Collection does not provide a freely accessible, year-by-year institutional publication-count report outside an institutional subscription, and OpenAlex. While a credible and increasingly widely used bibliometric resource in its own right, it is not a like-for-like substitute for a Web of Science-only count. Its broader source coverage means the absolute annual figures in Fig. 1 will not match a Web of Science-restricted count exactly, even though the two peer-reviewed studies discussed above corroborate the same directional trend and the same approximate 2010 inflection point. I present the evidence in this section as three converging but methodologically distinct sources. This includes a Scopus-based institutional study, a national Scopus-and-Web-of-Science mapping, and an OpenAlex-derived annual series rather than as three measurements of one identical underlying count.

5.4 What This Evidence Cannot Tell

I want to close this section with what I cannot honestly claim. This is a single-institution account, authored by the vision's own architect, notwithstanding the mitigations described in Section 5.1. The quantitative achievement data come from an internal administrative report rather than an externally audited source, and my bibliometric evidence, while independently authored, does not let me attribute causality to the vision specifically rather than to concurrent national policy and funding shifts in Ethiopian higher education more broadly. I cannot rule out that both the vision and the growth I describe were themselves downstream of that broader, government-driven expansion. A multi-institution comparison, an external audit of financial and enrolment data, and disaggregated Web of Science institutional trend data obtained through a full database subscription would each strengthen the claims this paper can only suggest.

6. Key roles of the Government

The Vision of Wisdom and its associated strategic goals reflect a historic and favorable government commitment to higher education. Two key aspects stand out to me. The first and most significant is the extraordinary commitment of governments to the expansion and strengthening of higher education in the nation, as measured by the substantial budget allocated to education. The second aspect is the unprecedented power and autonomy given to universities to make program and expansion decisions. None of this work would have been possible without favorable government support and direction. With empowerment comes accountability, and interested researchers may investigate the pros and cons of this approach.

7. Key Learnings for Leaders

Before naming what I take from this experience, it is worth situating this case against other research on Ethiopian university leadership. Dereb and Getahun found that Ethiopian public university leaders often hold a fragmented rather than integrated understanding of strategic management, focusing on isolated elements such as planning or transformational leadership rather than their combination [9]. Reading that finding against my own account, I suspect the twin-track, structurally integrated character of Vision of Wisdom 2025. The academic architecture (Section 3) and cultural communication (Section 4) we pursued together, rather than as separate initiatives, may be an unusual feature of this particular case. Rather than a generic feature of Ethiopian university strategic planning, we pursue a unique and somewhat unusual approach. If so, that integration, more than any single strategy, may be the most transferable part of what I am describing.

With that context, here is what I would want a junior leader or a student of leadership to take from this account.

6.1 An organic vision can outlive the leader who proposed it

The clearest evidence for this is that Bahir Dar University became a recognized research university in the nation. Most importantly, the university's research output did not slow down when I left office in 2010 E.C. It kept climbing, and its steepest years came after 2018 (Section 5.3). I read that as confirmation that the doctoral pipeline, the research centers, and the incentive structures we built were doing the work. A vision that depends on one leader's daily attention to survive is not yet institutional.

6.2 Continuous, honest communication, including of setbacks, is what builds ownership

Section 4 describes the repeated, multi-register communication, a song, a mural, a television program that I believe mattered more than any single announcement. But the more important part of that section, in hindsight, is the admission that this worked unevenly: better in units that adapted the vision into their own language, weaker where it stayed identified with my personal push. If I were advising a junior leader today, I would tell them that communicating only the achievements is not enough, and can even backfire once people notice the gaps between the official account and their own experience. Naming where the vision has not yet taken hold, and why, is itself part of building ownership, not a departure from it.

6.3 Durable structures, not personal authority, are what make change sustainable

The strategies in Section 3 research centers of excellence, research groups, graduate programs, and a staff leadership pipeline were, in effect, a bet that structure would outlast me better than my own authority would. Seven years on, I think that bet was the right one to make, though I can only partially

prove it (Section 5.4). For a junior leader, the practical version of this learning is to ask, of every initiative: if I left tomorrow, what continues to run without me? Where the honest answer is nothing, the initiative is not yet built into the institution.

A Closing Reflection

I offer this account to academic leaders and managers, as well as to students of higher-education leadership, not as a template to copy but as an honest reflection on what forming and carrying an institutional vision actually involves. Leadership, in my experience, is not the vision itself, nor the slide, the song, or the mural. It is the sustained work of turning an idea into reality and the internal drive that gives a leader the energy to persist when the work becomes difficult. I came to believe that leaders need a fire inside them: a genuine desire to make a difference in society. For me, that desire to use a university as an instrument for social transformation was strong enough to help me withstand challenges, setbacks, and resistance and continue doing what I believed was possible.

I also learned that lasting institutional transformation cannot depend on one leader's energy. It requires structures and systems that can carry the work forward. At Bahir Dar University, we therefore placed considerable emphasis on building research centers of excellence, research groups, and graduate programs that could create the institutional capacity and momentum for a research university. These structures were intended not simply to produce activities, but to embed research, innovation, and advanced learning into the institution itself so that progress could continue beyond individual leadership.

A third lesson was the importance of decentralization combined with accountability. Ownership grows when people have genuine responsibility for decisions and outcomes. I found that giving colleges, departments, research groups, and other units more space to lead and decide what to do with their budgets, while maintaining clear expectations and accountability, could strengthen both institutional stability and commitment. Leadership is therefore not only about directing people. Most importantly, it is about empowering them by creating conditions in which others can take responsibility and lead.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that leadership experiences should not simply be remembered. They should be examined, questioned, and studied. My experience is one case, shaped by my own perspective and inevitably incomplete. I encourage students and emerging leaders to undertake independent research on this and similar experiences, to test what worked, what did not, why certain approaches succeeded in one context, and whether they can be adapted elsewhere. Comparative accounts from other universities and leaders in Ethiopia and across Africa could help build a richer body of knowledge about higher-education transformation on the continent.

Ultimately, I do not see this experience as a finished story or a formula for institutional change. I see it as one lived experience from which questions can be asked, lessons can be tested, and new possibilities can emerge. I hope to develop these reflections further in a book, where the experiences, challenges, failures, and personal dimensions of the journey can be explored more fully. My hope is that the story will

not simply tell readers what happened at Bahir Dar University, but encourage them to ask what they themselves might change and what kind of institution they might help build.

Declarations

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Competing Interests

The author served as President of Bahir Dar University from 2003 to 2010 E.C. (2010–2018) and is the originator and chief implementer of the institutional vision examined in this paper. This directly competes with any claim about the vision's success and is addressed throughout the paper as a first-person reflective account rather than an independent evaluation, with particular attention in Section 5.1 (A Note on Evidence and My Own Bias). Beyond this disclosed role, the author declares no other competing financial or non-financial interests.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This paper is a first-person reflective account and document-based case study drawing on the author's own institutional records and previously published literature. It did not involve human subjects research, primary data collection from individuals, or animal subjects, and no ethics committee approval was therefore required or sought. Not applicable.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable. This manuscript does not contain any individual person's data in any form (including images, videos or identifiable case details).

Availability of Data and Materials

The two primary institutional documents used in this paper, the Final Vision 2025 Bahir Dar University presentation and exit report, are unpublished institutional documents held by the author and are available in Amharic from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The bibliometric data discussed in Section 5 are available in the cited published sources [7,8].

Authors' Contributions

This is a single-author paper. B.D. conceived the study, provided and interpreted the primary source documents, conducted the literature review, and wrote and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

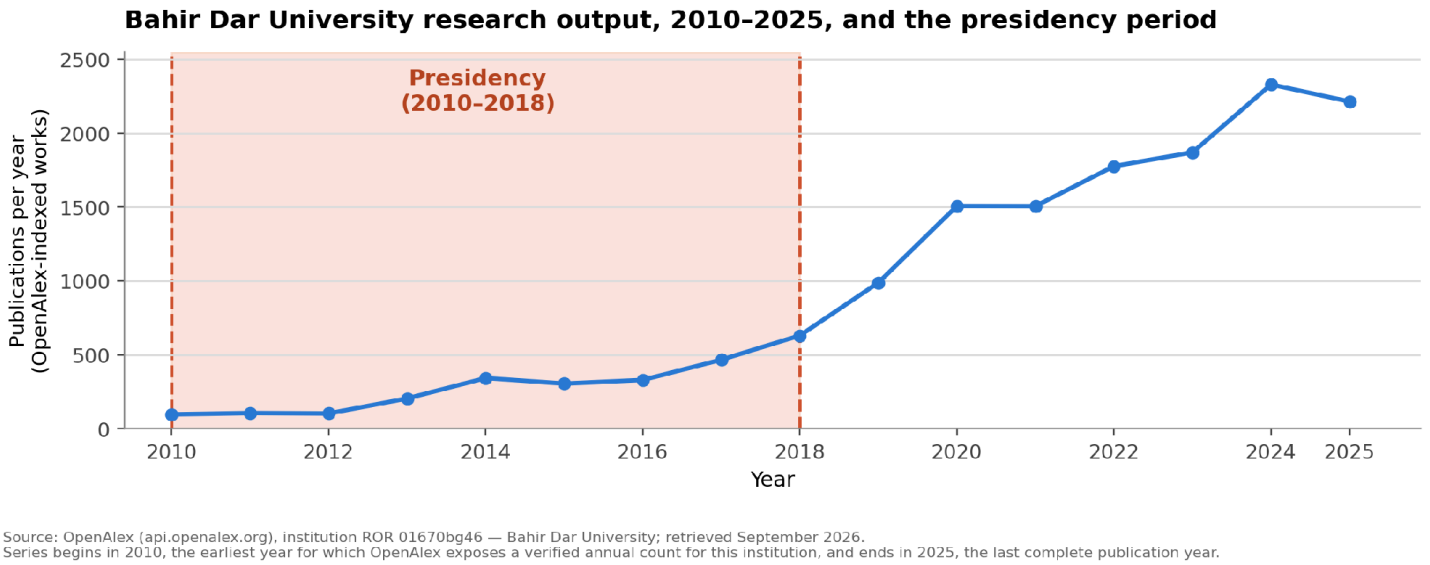


Figure 1

Bahir Dar University research output by year, 2010–2025, with the presidency period (2010–2018) marked by dashed vertical lines and shading. Annual counts represent works indexed in OpenAlex with a Bahir Dar University institutional affiliation (source: OpenAlex, institution ROR 01670bg46, retrieved September 2026 [10]). The series begins in 2010 because that is the earliest year for which OpenAlex provides a verified annual count for this institution, and ends in 2025, the last complete publication year at the time of writing; no earlier years are shown, verified or otherwise, and the incomplete 2026 year is omitted rather than shown as a partial point.