

**Proceedings of the Sixth National
Conference on Private Higher
Education Institutions (PHEIs)
In Ethiopia**

**Major Theme: Nurturing the Teaching
Research Nexus in Private Higher
Education Institutions (HEIs)**

**Organized & Sponsored
By
St. Mary's University College**

**August, 2008
UN Conference Center
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

Alternative Path of Increasing the Intake Capacity of Higher Education in Ethiopia: Challenges and Direction

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Abstract

Ethiopia must substantially increase higher education student intake and improve access. To fulfill this national demand there must be a common understanding that the public higher education institutes do not have an exclusive responsibility for higher education performance and private sector must also play a role. This paper examines student intake situation of Ethiopian higher education. The key argument of this paper is that higher education in Ethiopia is being in reality privatized. However, day to day activity of higher education system has remained the same like the old days. Instead of bringing a comprehensive education reform, the public higher education institution initiative remains hostage to the discretionary actions of the state. The state policy should focus on the linkage between higher education and society and use the linkage to create condition for society to have equal access in both private and public HEIs through formulation of policy guideline. The possible policy postures could be: Central-planning or Market-competitiveness. Central-planning, is one where private institutions are treated by the state much like the public with respect to enrollment through creation of the University of Affiliation; whereas in market-competitiveness both private and public HEIs will compete to have better enrollment of students. The state encourages only the competition by gathering and disseminating comparative information about institutions characteristics and performance.

Introduction

There has been a succession of challenges of access to university education in Ethiopia for many years. The first challenge arose in 1978/79 when it became necessary for the university in Ethiopia to admit two cohorts of students in order to clear up a backlog of students who had not been admitted the previous year due to two years university closure. In order to accommodate this double intake, the Addis Ababa University used facilities at various colleges and faculties within and outside Addis Ababa. The second major challenge to access occurred during the last few years when the current Ethiopian Government introduced a new education system that has produced a large number of high school graduates. The initial plan for accommodating this large inflow of students was to expand existing facilities in the public universities, build new universities in various part of the country and increase as well the private sector involvement in the tertiary education (proclamation 351/2003). The above initiatives to address the challenge of access generated collateral threats of compromised quality. The expansion of university capacities, for example, led to expansion in program duplication, and old universities were compelled to introduce courses that were not part of their mission in order to accommodate the additional students allocated to them. The expansion favored the arts, education and social science programs which did not require excessive infrastructure investment. At the same time most of the private higher education institutions build better capacity to handle arts, education and social sciences. During these periods Ethiopia has tried little to respond to the challenge of intake by adopting innovative financing models, commercialization of the public universities and market force approaches while maintaining quality. The new financing model (cost sharing) with semblance of commercialization of higher education in Ethiopia was triggered by its liberalization which started in 2003 when legal provisions were created to facilitate establishment of private higher education institutes. Since then, over 114 (71 diploma and 43 degree offering) private higher education institutions have been established in Ethiopia. The framework for a new financing model which works only for government sponsored higher education institutions does not encourage students to join private higher education institutions. Even the public universities are not in a position to exploit the other countries experience of self sponsored programs at full spectrum due to

overcrowded class arrangement. Thus, a true competition was not created between the private and public sectors. The current fashion of taking emergency responses to the challenge of intake figuratively could create an educational minefield with potential for explosion, and can lead to serious implications on the quality of higher education. In the past ten years the private sector has contributed to the betterment of higher education through creation of more efficient delivery systems. The challenge of intake in higher education of the country is, therefore, best addressed via a combination therapy, public and private partnership or giving equal footing for private higher education institutions.

The key argument of this paper is that higher education in Ethiopia is in reality being privatized. However, the day to day activity of the higher education system has remained the same as the old days. Instead of bringing a comprehensive education reform, the public higher education institution initiative remains hostage to the discretionary actions of the state. On the one hand, the higher education system remains regulated by the state, on the other hand, discretionary privatization is unable to mobilize private capital in productive ways.

The Challenge: Raising Student Intake in HEIs

Ethiopia did not own respected and reputable public or private universities by international standards. This has been because the higher education sector is generously financed by the state in absence of competition for fund. In the near future, the current HE finance system can not continue due to an increasing evidence of serious gaps in our national capacity; change in students' interest; development of new modes of providing higher education and low performance of higher education system in keeping pace with the global competition. As a result, the old regulatory model must be replaced by new forms of policy guidelines that could equally treat all HEIs and create competition to improve performance.

The government is committed to improve access as it can afford and adopt encouraging education policy that has increased student intake to the extent that has become too difficult for the public universities to bear the burden. As a result research is becoming

weak. Thus, the state needs to make judgment how to leverage the burden of student intake through strategic investment of resource in HEIs. It must be clear at this junction that rather than zigzagging between various solutions, the state must take this time to find market blended solutions in pursuit of the broader public interest. This will demand the tools that provide leverage using a variety of incentives including, but not confined to, partial funding of HEIs.

The Need for State Policy Leadership

Higher education has a critical role to play in Ethiopian economy and social cohesion. The population at large believes that the state-level public policy environment in which the higher education institutions operate must change in ways to meet the challenges of the rapidly emerging knowledge-based economic development and particularly the need for more Ethiopians to achieve education beyond high school, which is becoming the topic. To address these challenges, the state has issued the higher education proclamation No 351/2003, which has allowed the establishment of private higher education institutions. Since 2003 the number of accredited private higher education institutions has increased significantly and with unease problems they have contributed their share in producing skilled manpower and generating knowledge. However, the huge capacity of the private sector is not well utilized to reduce the pressure of the public universities and capital budget allocation of the public fund for the expansion. Currently, the contribution of private HEIs in enhancing national student intake in higher education is not well articulated.

The government must choose to focus on the capacity to formulate and implement better state policy to increase student intake to HEIs at national level through the involvement of the private sector rather than overburdening the public sector. There must be a common understanding that the public higher education institutes do not have an exclusive responsibility for higher education performance and private HEIs could play a major role if the policy environment is favorable. This approach will definitely create the possibility to reduce government capital investment in higher education, to increase private HEIs and allow the state to remain the decision-making entity responsible for

sustaining policy. The state policy should focus on the linkage between higher education and society and use this linkage to create conditions for society to have equal access both in private and public HEIs.

To reach the nationally aspired level of student intake, the state has to assist the private sector to build organizations that have a standard academic credibility. The purpose of this approach must be clear: Ethiopia must substantially increase higher education student intake and improve access. But, the question is, is it possible to reach the ambitious national higher education goal without the active involvement of the private sector? If so, would it be possible for the public HEIs to offer quality education under overstretched conditions?

Policy Interventions

To fulfill the national development expectation and produce qualified personnel, private and public higher education institutions would have to share resources while utilizing the available resources optimally, initiate new forms of academic collaboration by adopting new technologies, introduce on-line networking facility among higher education institutes not only to prepare a data-base of learning resources, but concentrate on their strengths and produce quality materials for the whole education sector. Higher education institutes must be encouraged to mobilize resources which could be used for the development of the nation. Such intervention could create strong partnership within the higher education system and minimize the involvement/investment of the government in tertiary education. At the end, tertiary education would not be focal area of government national investment area.

A highly powered joint commission or board at national level could be established to work on the issue of placement, funding and research as well as development work that could lead to innovations in curriculum, teaching and learning. The establishment of such powered team would act as a sensitive organ to forecast the future higher education development trends. In general, this set-up could predict the future trend and provide an early warning system in the employment sector as well as in educational management.

Such kind of arrangement could also encourage mobilizing additional resources by achieving better interaction with the other sectors such as the industry and business. The creation of competition between the public and private higher education institution will facilitate the optimum utilization of the available facilities/resources that could end up in improving the academic quality of the graduates.

Policy Postures

Dramatically increasing of student intake is unlikely under a business-as-usual scenario. We should think out of the existing framework. Without the government policy leadership and active involvement of public as well as private institutions it will be impossible to bring effective change. Traditional decision-making entities, which are built for other policies and times, should not crowd out this important public priority and the current system in place requires substantial redesigning. The specifics could differ across the training types.

There is no clear policy guideline how the private higher education institutions contribute to higher education sector. Thus, since the last proclamation, the performance of private higher education, was not seriously analyzed and implication of public policy postures toward private higher education was not well known. This was due to the absence of state student support; direct state payments to independent private institutions, etc. To overcome this problem and increase higher education student intake in the country, it is not possible to follow the *laissez-faire* policy posture. Under the current system, the possible policy postures towards student intake increment could be: central-planning or market-competitiveness.

Central-planning, where private institutions are treated by the state much like the public and play planned roles in the higher education system with respect to enrollment, is a posture in which the division between private and public higher education is rather blurred. The state funds for privates must be allocated in the form of direct subsidies, as in the case of many European countries. This pattern is at the opposite end of the conceptual continuum from the *italics* posture. In this pattern, private institutions are

incorporated integrally in the extensive state planning and management of higher education, get their share of attention when new state initiatives affecting higher education plan, and, most importantly, receive a substantial share of the state's higher education budget in the form of subsidy or loan. The central-planning approach usually implies little distinction being made between private and public institutions. Private institutions, dependent on state money are subjected to various formal and informal state model capable of sustaining MoE's mission and approach and maintain flexibility to respond to state demand. They will become quasi-public. In terms of enrollment share, the privates usually could represent ten or twenty percent.

There are various options to use private HEIs in order to increase the annual national student intake capacity of higher education sector. For example, in India the best private HEIs are affiliated to public HEIs in their areas. Under this arrangement the public HEIs are responsible to monitor and evaluate the education quality of the affiliated institutes. In other words, academically the affiliated private HEIs are regulated by the public HEIs. The partner HEIs are committed to work out different arrangements on various educational issues such as using the same syllabi, educational materials, etc and to the extent of giving the same exams in both institutes at the same time. Students from private HEIs could be awarded degree from the University of Affiliation. Under the current development status of the private HEIs in Ethiopia it may not be possible to arrange such twining or partnership in the field of natural sciences, but for social sciences, which do not require high tech laboratories, the chance is very high particularly in big cities like Addis Ababa.

Market-competitiveness, is one in which public institutions operate in an environment deliberately designed to be like that faced by the privates. The state introduces market elements into the higher education system, seeks to create a competitive, open market structure, and stresses the importance of individual student choice by allocating "portable" student aid grants, which enable students to 'vote with their feet'. In this pattern, state intervention is limited. Students from both private and public institutions qualify for student grants or/and tuition equalization grants are made available to students in private institutions. The state encourages private-public competition by gathering and

disseminating comparative information about institutions characteristics and performance. In this model, in contrast to the previous one, public and private institutions are more autonomous in terms of academic issues.

Both of these possible policy postures look unrealistic and inapplicable under our condition. At this time, we have to admit that no single model of policy has yet been proven to accomplish what the country needs. Substantial increase in HEIs students' intake could not be ensured unless we encourage open and frank discussion, debate and refinement of the existing policy. We need a different language for talking about, and designing, the type of policy capacities, a language that will draft us away from the current ways of thinking to bring zero-sum struggles within the higher education system. MoE must be able to invite responses to this idea and must be in a position to engage the federal government on this issue. This may probably be the legacy of rational growth, broad access and higher educational quality.

Rethinking

The Ethiopian government must focus on both public and private higher education institutes in order to increase student intake. One major change that could be introduced is the shift in financing from a state-funded system to one that requires all higher education institutes to rely more and more on private funds, tuition fees, own generated money from various interventions, etc. This includes the expectation that students will also depend largely on government loan or private financing for their education. The government will be involved in regulatory works and could utilize the capital investment of higher education in other economic sectors or expansion of basic education. Total liberalization of the tertiary education will also expand the role of foreign educational institutions to take part in the growing market for education in Ethiopia. This shift in funding will force and encourage the private institutions to work on academic quality and seek other fund sources rather than depending on student fee and at same time will force the public higher education institutes to seek alternatives to raise most of their operating funds from other sources rather than being government-funded enterprises. Under the current political system in near future, the central government would not be able to

provide all the money needed for higher education, so public HEIs must be initiated by the government to “face the market” through creation of competition in student placement. Although the total financial support for education from the central government continued to increase, in near future it will be expected that large amounts will be on other educational sub-sectors. So that tertiary education will receive a smaller fraction of the national budget, which must be allocated only to student loan. What must remain as sources of fund are contracts and university-run business enterprises, adult education programs and student tuition charges.

If the Ethiopian government introduces the truth concept of market that brings keen competition among institutions nationwide and funds only few high quality institutions there is a possibility of merger of institutes that causes reduction in the number. Here the issue of merger is not only valid to private institutes, but equally valid for the public one. The merger is not physical one, rather structural.

Competition between higher education institutes would be impossible without higher education loan system for needy students since the majority of population can not support their children’s education cost at higher level. In any case, student loans are still a small part of the whole financing system and government must be able to shoulder it or arrange bank loan system. These loans, however, can only be used for tuition. The central government must provide scholarships in addition to loans to students from poor families and rural areas. In addition the university must also provide scholarships based on academic achievement. Under any circumstance the government must allocate fund to HEIs. But, each institute has to compete for the available fund that will be for expenditures such as facilities or equipment.

Observations and Predictions

One of the most interesting aspects of this paper is the opportunity to speculate about what might happen if the government is determined to create competition by introducing a new placement policy.

As long as MoE controls the placement process, higher education institutions are not competing with one another in the way that institutions challenge one another like in other countries. Although Ethiopian universities to engage in recruitment of graduate student, they simply accept all of the undergraduate students assigned to them. This lack of institutional involvement in student placement must be changed and the government should reform and relax the current system to give chance for students to join the higher education institute they prefer. Currently, as government financed organizations, public universities can not negotiate or propose change on number of students and they lack the freedom to make the final decision or manipulate decision. The issue of marketing/privatization may be a classic example of looking at the glass and deciding whether it is half empty or half full. It is clear for all scholars that this strict regulation of student placement is part of the long tradition of centralized control over higher education and all believe that it must have changed with the change of political direction of the country. Whatever the cost may be, one significant area for the exercise of market forces, of course, is the introduction of decentralized student placement approach. If the government is willing to introduce this approach, some institute will keep on moving for their better performance (market share); and others will cease to exist since they have no state subsidy to support them. The few that come out of this challenge could be those who serve a different student market or best education quality. The absence of such fully operating market in Ethiopia, particularly in student placement will significantly affect the reputation and educational quality of some of the universities and affects the development of the emerging private higher education institutions. If the country continues to follow the current mode of the student placement, it will take a long period to come to the era of true institutional competition for fund. Neglecting the cost implication aside it would be good for government policymakers to look at the positive implications of competitive based student placement before imitating this aspect of other countries. Once the competition for students through financial aid has started, it will definitely bring qualitative changes.

One of my frequent thinking was “after the initiation of private higher education institutes what would be the situation of the higher education sub-sector in the coming

years?” But my wish and the reality did not go side by side. The usual observations were student population has slide down and the triple mandates of higher education were not fulfilled in most private institutions and in opposite in the public sector more students , low research output, reduction of student participation in practical, more programs with a low percentage of PhDs holder and more scholars going out of the higher education system. These conditions forced me to look for appropriate solution, thus, talked with top ranking scholars in higher education institutions. But, without specifying exactly what the current problems are, all have taken “democratic management” that involves consultation with key stakeholders as the only means to come out of the existing higher education challenge.

One can observe that the higher education scene in Ethiopia is very fluid right now, but it would solidify in the coming years if the government gives students the right to choose their placement, introduce tuition fee, loan, etc. Thus, institutions that want to make change, or need to make change, will have a relatively short window of opportunity in which to implement significant reforms. This scene may also force also the Government of Ethiopia to look the issue of expansion of tertiary education using the public fund critically. The rapidity with which certain projects are being undertaken (the construction of new public universities) and not encouraging the private higher institutions somewhat haphazard changes without a long-range plan. Policymakers and policy analysts also must be mindful of this window of opportunity “private higher education”. From my long year’s observation in the higher education sector of Ethiopia, I think of this as an exciting time to raise important questions. Let me posit a few. Under the existing pressure, are Ethiopian public higher education institutes competitive enough to offer quality education? and what will be the share of the private sector to bring the change? In the time of globalization, will MoE sustain with the current trend of HEI management, which did not bring the expected reform, for a long period of time? These questions must get answers.

Rather than strengthening the control, I assume that the current national higher education funding that lack equity could not fuel the higher education reform in this country and cannot continue forever. Due to the introduction of new funding model people may ask

how will the relationship between MoE and individual higher education institutes continue to develop if MoE does not have direct control over student placement and fund? My guess is that after the introduction of competition for student placement by public and private higher education institutions, MoE will be expected to exercise new forms of control in the future—indirect, more subtle, more sophisticated rather than top-down directives. As is the case in many countries, government will shift to a steering function rather than a command and control model.

The Way Forward

The intellectuals are optimistic about the future of tertiary education in Ethiopia. The activities in most higher education institutions during the last few years indicated that young academicians are determined to bring reform, willing to enter market competition and undertake high-quality research provided that the government paves the way. The degree of progress in the last few years is not discouraging, but forced the scholars to speculate various possibilities. Certainly the breadth of change and the government determination were impressive. But, after the proclamation 351/2003 the government felt to introduce market competition in higher education system. There was an expectation that Ethiopian higher education system will change virtually in every dimension in a very short time through the free participation of each personnel in the system. Ethiopian scholars are not traditionally conservative about their own lives and work, but they are being forced to shift ground quite dramatically due to top down command in every aspect. If there is a shift in school of thinking it will be a ground to believe that higher education will be responsive to reform and the relationship between MoE and individual higher education institutes will be in a much better position than the current days. Higher education institutes will interact with the larger society in ways that are unimagined by the government.

The higher education reform has produced many positive results. Undeniably, the higher education reform has produced many positive results. Despite these, the country should view skeptically any allegations that education system is still failing and not allow

criticism and to overshadow signs of positive momentum. The country must act on what the national scholars know and build on the progress already made.

The new development is not quite so unpromising. But, we must bear in mind that national achievements must be based on scholars experience and comparisons of different education systems. However, at the same time it must be taken into account that the generation demands always new intervention which is not rooted in the indigenous knowledge and these demands must be fulfilled as long as they are responsible to carry the financial burden.

For the last three decades there was an impression that the quality of the graduates from the higher education institutions have declined, but the impression was without looking the higher education environment. Most of the academicians believe that student did not failed, but the system was weak to address the real issue.

As author of this paper I have tried to reflect my concern and none of you will expect me to bring every aspect of the issue. My aim is to initiate discussion on this important issue, i.e. quality education, student placement and creation of competition between the public and private higher education institutions.

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