Transformations in Higher Education: Experiences with Reform and Expansion in Ethiopian Higher Education System

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Introduction

Higher education is of paramount importance for economic and social development. Inculcating relevant knowledge and advanced skills, higher education provides the human resources required for leadership, management, business and professional positions. The institutions also serve as the major research establishments that generate, adopt and disseminate knowledge. By giving people access to knowledge and the tools for increasing and diversifying their knowledge, higher education expands people’s productivity, as well as national capacity and competitiveness. Today, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, more interdependent and increasingly a globalized village, higher education is critical for the achievement of economic progress, political stability and peace, as well as for building democratic culture and society.

The 20th century’s scientific and technological achievements were due, in large part, to the growth of higher education and the immense contribution and endeavor of the personnel trained within it. Without adequate higher education and research institutions providing a critical mass of skilled and educated people, no country can ensure genuine endogenous and sustainable development (UNESCO, 1998).

Although its contribution in the last fifty years was laudable in many respects, higher education in Ethiopia was and is not earnestly and fully participating in the development efforts of the country. With their out of date orientation and worn out traditions, higher education institutions in Ethiopia have deprived our country of the opportunity of getting out of poverty and underdevelopment. This assertion, in large part, holds true for the higher education systems in other African and developing countries, as well. This mainly refers to their less than ideal involvement and lack of concerted efforts towards changing the underdevelopment, poverty and undemocratic situations of our countries.

Higher education in Ethiopia is going through a decisive phase of reform and expansion. As a system it is increasingly required to respond and gear adequately to the development needs of the society and the country. This change is taking place through a government-led radical review of the system’s status and challenges, and by devising mechanisms of consensus building, as well as ownership and overcoming the resistance to change, characteristics of a higher education community.

A multidimensional crisis of profound economic impact and social deterioration during the Derg regime (1974-1991) contributed to weaken institutions of higher education in Ethiopia. It has undermined the confidence, which socio-economic patterns had in them and diminished their quality, efficiency and impact on development. Until about a decade ago, the absence of a clear vision of the social and economic importance of higher education, severe resource constraints and settings that provide access to

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the benefit of the elite only have contributed to the fact that the contribution of higher education to socio-economic development in our countries has been much less than expected. Therefore, there was a need to revitalize and transform the sector immediately after the downfall of the Derg regime.

The Harare declaration of 1982, adopted by Ministers of Education and those responsible for Economic Planning, stressed the need for the African Member States to ensure that changes in the organization of higher education and its curricula and research activities would enable it to make a more substantial contribution to development and to improvements in the education system (UNESCO 1982). However, as we stand in the twenty-first century, the efforts to translate the Declaration into action, so far, have not been spectacular. A recent UNESCO report (UNESCO, 2003) has also shown that although enrolments have grown significantly in Sub-Saharan Africa, several challenges still remain, related mainly to resource constraints and a consequent decline in the quality of education and research.

Ethiopia, and Africa at large, lags behind in scientific and technological advancement. We are mired in a state of underdevelopment, poverty, poor health inadequate education coverage, and consequent marginality. Although with immense potential and possibilities, we are poor in competitiveness in this era of globalization and knowledge economies. Building our higher education capacity is, therefore, not a luxury but a necessity in order to use our potential and to bring sustainable development of our countries.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight and make widely available the modest experience in the past few years and the lessons of experience with higher education expansion and reform in Ethiopia. It tries to bring together a number of activities, initiatives, interactive dialogues and consultations. It also tries to show how opportunities and challenges in transforming the higher education sector were entertained in the Ethiopian context.

The paper is structured such that it deals progressively with the status of higher education in Ethiopia, the political landscape, the policy and strategy of the reform agenda, its implementation and challenges, as well as the major lessons learnt and the future directions of higher education.

STATUS OF ETHIOPIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Ethiopian higher education is relatively young. Higher education in Ethiopia started a little over 50 years ago. Currently there are 6 universities and 5 colleges/institutes under the Ministry of Education. There are a few other higher education institutions run under other ministries, such as the Ministry of Defense. Regional governments also sponsor several junior (mainly teacher education) colleges. Private provision of higher education and training in Ethiopia started in early 2000 and currently there are about 20 accredited institutions.

Graduate level training started in Addis Ababa University in 1979, followed by Alemaya University in 1984. Later on the Wondo Genet College of Forestry started graduate programs in forestry. Jimma, Debub and Mekelle universities, as well as Gonder and Arbaminch, are in the process of starting graduate program studies.

As the system extended, enrollments also grew. In the period between 1996 and 2003 the annual intake of students in the undergraduate programs grew from about 9,000 to over 18,000 just in the Ministry of Education sponsored institutions. Including other government and non-government/private higher education institutions, the annual intake has more than tripled during the same period. The enrolment in graduate programs has increased from around 200 to over 2,000.

The participation rate and the total student population in higher education are extremely low. The participation rate is around 1%, one of the lowest in the World. It is low even by Sub-Saharan Africa
standards which are about 3%. While over 50 percent of the 18 to 23 age cohort in developed countries has access to higher education, only about 5 percent of this same age cohort in the developing countries has access (World Bank, 2000; UNESCO, 2002).

Including the accredited programmes of private providers, the total student population of the higher education system in Ethiopia has increased from about 35,000 to over 100,000 during the period between 1996 and 2003. Although private provision started in 2000, about 18% of the total enrolment in 2003 was accounted for by private higher education institutions. This is a significant achievement in a relatively short time. However, this rapid increase may level off shortly as quality, which is usually undermined by a profit motive of the mushrooming institutions, becomes more demanded. The demand comes from the beneficiary students and their families as well as the private providers themselves. The number of graduates is also very low, even in sub Saharan standards. There are only about 62 graduates of higher education per 100 thousand people, indicating a lack of highly trained personnel and the poor competitive status of our country.

The Ministry of Education is the federal institution mandated for oversight and regulatory provisions in the education sector. The quality, relevance and meeting of standards by all higher education institutions (both public and private) are regulated by the Ministry. Public institutions have boards as their highest governing body, with the senate as the highest academic body and the presidents as the top executives at institutional level.

Prior to 1994, due to the lack of any democratic rights for people of the country, little but critically scrutinized academic autonomy was practiced by higher education institutions. This was expressed by the top-down approach in areas such as curricula development and adoption, staff recruitment and promotions. During the Derg regime, the government decided that some courses, such as Marxist Leninist Philosophy and Political Economy, should be given as compulsory courses in all institutions. It was also the case that teaching staff were recruited/appointed and staff academic promotions given by the government. Generally, although academic autonomy existed in the affairs of development and review of curricula, design and undertakings of research and involvement in scientific affairs, it was not at all full academic autonomy. Except for full administrative and financial autonomy, the academic autonomy of institutions has been respected by the government and the regulatory body the last few years. However, administrative and financial autonomies have been given to institutions only recently with the new higher education law. From historical times the definition of autonomy has lent itself to diverse interpretations and, even today, it frustrates the system’s internal operation unnecessarily. With universities being public institutions but seeking to free themselves from certain common orientation and guidelines, it has become increasingly difficult for the regulatory body (the Ministry) to monitor and supervise the institutions under its purview.

Generally, higher education in Ethiopia is not well developed. It faces problems associated with the quality and relevance of programs of studies and research, equity, resource constraints, and inefficient resource utilization. The universities’ contribution to the development of the country, particularly by producing large numbers of the human resources required for development and undertaking relevant and quality research, is not significant.

**POLITICAL LANDSCAPE**

The deepening economic decline, the political situations, and the shifts in priorities caused by war created immense pressure on the Derg regime (1974-1991) to limit or diminish public sector expenditure. Accordingly, the capacity of the government and its willingness to support the provision and development of education, and in particular higher education, in Ethiopia was severely affected. Above all, there was a lack of a clear direction, vision and commitment for the development of higher education in the country.
The leadership of the country in general had little or no genuine desire, commitment or perseverance to change the poor state of higher education.

However, this situation (as well as the leadership) have changed positively and significantly since 1991. This has been demonstrated by the current government’s broad and forward-looking educational vision, clearly defined policies and priorities, realistic education sector development strategies, and sufficient support to attain better and equitable access and overall quality. Provision of financial and material resources and a responsible attitude towards the development of the sector with creativity and innovation are also characteristics of the current government.

In the early 1990s, the government identified the need for strengthened, re-oriented and revitalized human resource development as a key to the success of socio-economic policies and strategies. The need was felt during the transitional period (1991-1994) when a serious shortage of trained, able and adaptable workforce and leaders at different levels within the new government structure was encountered in the intent to develop democratic society. The government’s new economic policies, private sector initiatives and development, as well as the new federal system and the absence of any institutions of higher learning in many of the regions, have called the attention of government leadership to expansion and reform of the sector. Though higher education in Ethiopia had been in existence for almost half a century, the level of enrolment, the number of graduates, and contribution of the sector to the development of the country were limited. With a shift in the social and economic development directions of the country, it has become essential to expand equitable access and to reform the education system, including the higher education sector.

For the last ten years we have experienced a unique situation where the government is committed to education and the Ethiopian society seems to have woken up to the importance of education. Until recently, the significant and meaningful role that higher education plays in the improvement of the life of the society, the overall development of the country, and the reduction of poverty was not properly addressed in government strategies and was not given due public attention. The higher education system was mediocre by not being in a position to inspire the country’s government and society towards poverty alleviation and sustainable development. With the new government in 1991, free market economic policies, improved environment for private investments, and the relatively better and steady growth of the economy, as well as openness to the world and the spread of information and communication technologies, have required more personnel with higher education and training. These situations have improved the society’s outlook and the focus of the government on higher education to meet the increasing demands of the world of work.

The top leadership of the government was and is the champion of the reform and expansion endeavor. Most initiatives have emanated and been aggressively pursued, with close guidance, supervision and support from the top leadership. The Ministry of education and many of the institutions of higher education were also involved critically in the development and implementation of the new agenda.

The major points of contention were the issue of expansion versus quality, and the wish to continue with the status quo versus the need to reform and change. Some reluctance grew out of concern and caution, while other resistance was due to pessimism, many times infused with political partisanship. Many opposing the endeavor from political points of view were not looking the agenda as issue of development and the way out of poverty and misery. These concerns were largely addressed and many were brought on board by the transparent manner with which the agenda was tabled and through consensus building efforts. Consultation meetings with leaders of institutions and other stakeholders (other sector ministries, chamber of commerce, private providers, etc.), periodic radio, television and newspaper press releases, as well as workshops with donors and partners, have helped to develop consensus and wider public awareness.
Higher education is confronted with formidable challenges and must proceed to the most radical change and renewal it has never been required to undertake (UNESCO, 1998). With its expansion, higher education in Ethiopia, as elsewhere in the world, has never needed to change quite so much as it does now. The higher education institutions are increasingly required to recognize the social and economic difficulties of the country, and to make themselves part of the society and the solutions for its problems. The times have gone when higher education institutions could isolate themselves from the rest of the society and build walls that virtually turned them into a city within a city.

POLICY FRAMEWORK AND REFORM STRATEGIES

Little or no structural changes have occurred in Ethiopia’s higher education sector over the past several decades. The roles of higher education have changed little or have remained unclear. The reality of the country’s socio-economic situation and dynamism, as well as the global situation of advances made in terms of information and communication, knowledge and education technologies, have made the need for transformation in the higher education sector much more important. Although this is not the first time that higher education institutions and the system have needed to change, they have never needed to change quite so much as they do now. While universities in many countries have accomplished a radical change, Ethiopian higher education (particularly in public institutions) has largely stuck to a model, which has become obsolete, and in many cases out of touch with its socio-economic environment.

The Ethiopian higher education reform process has followed at least three essential phases: a phase of policy and strategy adoption ultimately aimed at redefining the legal framework, a phase of rehabilitation and expansion of the facilities, and a phase of improvement and revitalization of the system. The first phase involved the issuance of the Education and Training Policy, Agriculture Development Led Industrialization Strategy, Economic Policy, various economic and social policies and strategies, Education Sector Development Plans, and other relevant white papers of the government. The second and third phases basically refer to the actual expansion of the sector and the reform issues necessary to maintain quality and relevance within the expanding higher education system.

Reform policies and strategies

A succession of new policies was designed and implemented in Ethiopia over the past few years with an eye to setting Ethiopia on a new course of development and poverty alleviation. The Education and Training Policy (TGE, 1994) has been the major framework for reform and transformation. The policy has stressed issues of quality and relevance in educational programs; quality of teaching staff and facilities; improvement of learning process towards a focus on students; improvement of management and leadership; introduction of financial diversification, including income generation and cost-sharing by students; and improvement in the system of evaluation, monitoring, autonomy and accountability.

The education and training policy is sufficiently precise to guide decision-making and the allocation of resources necessary for the improvements and steady strengthening of the sector. The policy and its strategies are consistent with the aspirations and the needs of national development in all its forms. They emphasize the development of problem-solving capacities and culture in the content of education curricula structures and approach. Along with this, they direct that there be appropriate nexus between education, training, research and development through coordinated participation among relevant stakeholders. The policies require higher education at diploma, degree and graduate level to be practice oriented, enabling students to become problem-solving professional leaders in their fields of study and in overall societal needs. The policy outlines clearly selected goals, means and decisions. It defines to what ends education should be directed, what should be taught and how, decisions as to organization, facilities and administrative arrangements, as well as coordination amongst its several elements. Above all, it has
spelt out the need for an effective and efficient delivery system. With the provisions of the policy and its strategy, the government and the higher education community have begun a concerted effort to design detailed strategies outlining the reform and the future directions of higher education in Ethiopia.

On the basis of a 20-year strategic direction concept produced by government, a sector development program for education was initiated and prepared in 1997. Donors, partners and relevant stakeholders were involved in the preparation and endorsement of the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) which had activities spanning over five years, ending in 2002. The second ESDP has also been prepared for the period 2003-2005. Higher education is a major component of the sector development programs.

A December 1998 framework document on capacity building in Ethiopia was developed into a policy paper entitled “Capacity Building Strategy and Programs” (FDRE, 2002). This has addressed the need to coordinate the several efforts undertaken to further the country’s socio-economic development, create democratic systems, and ensure good governance. It has also stipulated the identification and prioritization of initiatives, within the Agricultural Development Led Industrialization Strategy of the government development agenda. The capacity building strategy defines capacity as involving human resource development, creating and strengthening institutions, and establishing effective working systems, as well as ensuring that there is a strong mechanism in place to address these simultaneously. The strategy clearly emphasizes the creation of a “capacity for capacity building.” This focuses on establishing and strengthening the training, studies and research arm. In relation to higher education, it has identified improvement of quality, strengthening the financial system and efficiency, and expanding equitable access as areas for policy consideration and direction. The Ethiopian Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (ESDPRP) paper (MOFED, 2002) has also given clear directions and roles to higher education in Ethiopia.

Initiation and consolidation of the expansion and reform agenda

Of the many important economic and social growth initiatives of the government of Ethiopia, perhaps one that holds great promise and possibility of large scale and sustainable returns is the effective expansion of higher education in the country. The impact of higher education encompasses not only the economic sector, but also will produce greater social impact contributing to a just, democratic, peaceful and enlightened society.

The reform and expansion agenda was initiated and followed critically in its implementation by the government. The initiative to transform higher education through relevant expansion, improving the systems’ efficiency and effectiveness, and providing a conducive environment for the sector has demonstrated the commitment and competence of the leadership of the country to the entire endeavor of change. At all echelons of the leadership of the government as well as to a large extent the governance of higher education institutions, keen interest and support has been observed and cultivated. This was later translated into ownership of the agenda that has helped generate success in the implementation.

Higher education is increasingly required to overcome its problems, reorganize and be responsive to the needs of the society and the country. This was the motto for the need to reform and transform the sector about a decade ago in Ethiopia. The reform agenda was spelt out from the very beginning in 1994, as set out in the several policies and strategies. The agenda focused on revisiting the vision and missions of the sector, improving quality and relevance, expanding, diversifying and ensuring equity of access, diversifying financial resources and improving efficiency of the system, as well as enhancing leadership and management. A special consideration and effort was given to building consensus on the reform and expansion agenda through all its phases of initiation and implementation.
In 1995 the government took the initiative to organize a national conference on issues of higher education at Nazreth. The major objectives of the conference were to evaluate the status of higher education, its problems and challenges, and outline its relationship to the country’s development agenda. Heads of institutions, regional institutions’ board members, renowned persons and education experts and other stakeholders participated in the conference. This conference was the first and comprehensive undertaking in building stakeholder consensus and bringing to the fore issues, problems and challenges of the higher education sector in Ethiopia.

As a follow-up and consolidation of the Nazareth meeting, a larger and more focused conference was held at Debre Zeit in 1996. The two conferences focused on issues of (a) general status and major problems of higher education in Ethiopia, (b) issues of effectiveness and efficiency, (c) alternatives for widening resource base of financial requirements, (d) undergraduate and graduate programs’ quality and relevance, (e) research and studies in higher education, (f) relations between regional governments and higher education institutions, and (g) relations between higher education and the other levels of education. As a result, a document outlining the *Future Directions of Higher Education in Ethiopia* (MOE, 1997) was prepared at this conference. This was in its true sense, the first major step towards identifying the priorities for action and clearly defining the vision and mission of higher education in Ethiopia. It was also a major step in building and strengthening the already started consensus amongst the major stakeholders on issues and strategies on higher education reform.

The *Future Directions of Higher Education in Ethiopia* document identified the major challenges and problems of the higher education sector in Ethiopia as: (a) Lack of clarity in vision and mission, (b) Problems of quality and relevance of programs of studies and research, (c) Lack of clear program and institutional evaluation mechanisms, (d) Financial and resource constraints, (e) Lack of alternative ventures in resource mobilization in addition to the public purse, (f) Inefficiency in resource utilization, and (g) Poor quality and commitment of the leadership of the sector at all levels. The document stressed the importance of properly tackling these major challenges in the ensuing activities of higher education expansion and reform in Ethiopia.

**Revisiting vision and mission statements**

We believe that the higher education reform and expansion will succeed if we set a clear vision and relevant mission for the system. The vision of higher education in Ethiopia, therefore, is designed to embody the development of quality human resource and the generation and dissemination of knowledge to fulfill the requirements of the country’s development needs, societal transformation, poverty reduction, as well as building democratic and peaceful society.

The Debrezeit and Nazreth conferences outlined areas of focus for the mission of Ethiopian higher education system as: (a) producing qualified citizens who would contribute to the regional and national social and economic development, (b) undertaking research to generate, transfer and apply knowledge for the development of the country and to further science and technology, (c) providing services to the local and national society, and (d) inculcating relevant knowledge. In its generality, the mission statement that was developed was: “producing (in a cost effective and result oriented manner) quality human resource in disciplines relevant for the socio-economic development of Ethiopia, as well as undertaking relevant and quality research.” Having done that, it was easy to identify challenges and opportunities for and against meeting the mission and towards the reform and expansion endeavors.

Higher education in Ethiopia, therefore, was required to revise a certain number of dogmas and legacies inherited from its previous models. In addition to its traditional role of educating, creating knowledge and developing the mind, it is increasingly asked to train, be student-centered, practice-oriented, society-focused, and to teach professions that require skills and hands-on training, as well.
Quality and relevance of higher education

There can be no doubt that one of the predominant concerns about the educational enterprise is the sustenance of quality. The standard of education in Ethiopia at all levels was declining greatly and the entire education system was at stake in the early 1990’s. The performance of university graduates in the work place, as well as their adaptability and leadership abilities, were not as much as expected and should be. Most graduates were good in the theoretical knowledge but poor in skills and in the application of the knowledge they gained from the universities in to the real world of work. The main element of the strategy to improve the performance of higher education against which progress can be measured includes improved quality of teaching and research, increased responsiveness to labor market demands, and greater equity. Enhancing quality involves student preparation and training, availability of higher motivated and competent teaching staff, supplying adequate facilities and inputs and strengthening evaluation and monitoring mechanisms towards quality of training and research outputs.

The Ethiopian higher education reform anticipates the establishment of a Quality and Relevance Assurance Agency (QRAA) to develop standards and evaluate institutions to maintain quality and relevance. The agency will be an autonomous body responsible for evaluating, monitoring and providing support to higher education institutions in the country. It will also serve as advisory body for the government on issues of standards, quality and relevance of higher education programs of study. The government and the higher education community have purposely included “Relevance” as a major issue to be addressed by the agency. This is mainly because of the concern that with increasing expansion and diversification there may be situations where curricula may become out of context and produce graduates that do not fit to the socio-economic needs of the country.

The reform has also recommended the establishment of Pedagogical Resource Centers (PRC) in each institution as another means of ensuring quality. A National Pedagogical Resource Center has been established in Addis Ababa University with the mandate to train trainers for the different institutions. The training has focused on issues of how lecturers organize their work, how they use available resources, understand purposes of the education offered, determine the desired learning outcomes, design the right course content, and organize the teaching-learning process. It has stressed active learning, exploitations of teaching aids, ICT and new teaching-learning methods, as well as on preparation of teaching materials, curricula development and review. The trainers are expected to establish similar centers in their respective institutions, so that all the teaching staff will go through such trainings and improve their capacity continuously. These centers facilitate the training of teaching staff on campus. With appropriate reference materials, visual aids and computers, the centers can magnify the impact of the trainings that encourage staff to put into practice the techniques, methodologies and new ways of doing things.

One of the most critical reform activities in Ethiopia in relation to quality and relevance is the curricula review. The curricula of higher education in Ethiopia, both at undergraduate and graduate programs, were in many cases judged as having large elements of irrelevance with respect to the current national and global development situations. Emphasis is given to the urgent need to revise and adapt the curricula to meet national, social, economic, cultural and geographical circumstances. Each department prepared a curriculum and this was evaluated by relevant stakeholders. Previously, each university department was copying and adapting curricula for different programs from relevant countries, adjusted as per the policy provisions (duration, practical orientation, etc.). The documents from each institution were collected and universities with similar programs were required to look into the curricula of each other and make necessary adjustments and amendments. This final document is to be used as the basic document for a given curriculum, but each university is then expected to adjust as per its situations and circumstances.
In revisiting the curricula, we have opted for copying and adapting relevant curricula from other countries. There was and still is a strong resistance to changing the status quo curricula, denying the dynamic nature of education and training curricula all over the world. The very nature, particularly in older institutions, that the academia largely does not accept any change was at the center of this resistance. Consultation meetings, creation of awareness to the need for change, the need to work within the framework of the policy, the need to adapt to new social and economic realities in the country, and the world at large, have contributed to building consensus. Recently all curricula in higher education programs are in the process of overhauling, using materials adapted from other countries such as India, Tanzania and Ireland and reoriented as per the policy provisions. Education and training with the revised curricula will begin in the 2003/04 academic year.

The other important quality agenda is to make higher education student- and community-oriented. Higher education has been asked to focus on student-centered approaches in its training and education as well as research. Furthermore, to prepare the graduates properly for the world of work, learning activities are required to become practice and community oriented. To this effect, in 1999, higher education institutions came together and adopted the concept of community-oriented practical education/training (COPE) to be incorporated in all disciplines and institutions. Before this, many institutions, particularly those with disciplines such as agriculture and engineering, had practical training programs. However, these trainings were not fully integrated in their curricula and they were not followed up regularly. The community-based education (CBE) approach of Jimma University and the practical attachment program of Mekelle and Debub Universities were also excellent experiences for the adoption of COPE in all higher education institutions as part of the curricula. This was one of the major objectives of the quality agenda that was adopted by all institutions and incorporated in the recent curricula review. COPE, as part of the curricula of each course, is mandatory for all students and will be given from the beginning of the study until graduation. Almost all fields (e.g., health sciences and medicine, agriculture, business, law, etc) are required to have a COPE component.

As part of putting the students at the center of the system, students are involved vigorously in staff evaluations and in participating in the affairs of the institutions. There is a move towards strengthening student associations as partners and making students represented in the academic commissions. This has contributed to positively shape the teaching staff, making the students more responsible and developing sense of ownership, as well as support the leadership and management in the affairs of institutions.

Higher education is the leading part of the education system of a country. In fact, there is and should continue to be a very close interdependence and relationship between the higher education system and the other levels of education. Without a sound primary and secondary system the higher education has no solid basis. For higher education, therefore, none of its responsibilities is greater than that of contributions to the maintenance and continuous improvement of the system of which it is the leading part. This was adopted by the participants and stakeholders of the Nazreth and Debrezeit conferences, and was adopted as a major issue in the strategy of higher education capacity building. Therefore, emphasis on producing large number of teachers mainly for secondary schools is at the center of the expansion program. It was agreed that of the total student enrolment, at least 30% shall be enrolled in teacher education faculties, and trained according to the recommendations of a recent study. A study entitled Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO) has made several relevant recommendations reviewing the way we recruit, train and educate our teachers. It emphasizes school-based and student-centered learning, practice-oriented training, and self-preparedness for the profession. The curricula needs to be reviewed in line with this and envisages skills upgrading training for the teacher trainers in universities and institutions. These recommendations are to be implemented in all teacher education faculties and institutes as of the 2003/04 academic year.
As the undergraduate program expanded, a critical shortage of qualified teaching staff in the universities was faced. There is no higher education of high quality without teachers of high quality. Therefore, two strategies were designed and implemented during the past eight years. The first was to strengthen and expand the local graduate level (masters and doctorate) programs. This required investment in human resource development, infrastructure and facilities. A number of staff members were sent abroad, mainly to India, to pursue their masters and doctoral level training for this purpose. The second was the recruitment of expatriate staff, mainly from India but also involving volunteers from the United Kingdom, United States, Nigeria and Cuba. In the 2002/03 academic year there were over 380 expatriates working in higher education institutions (268 Indians, 49 Cubans, 45 Nigerians, 20 VSO, etc.). While these expatriates are serving in the country, those Ethiopians who are sent abroad are expected to complete their studies and fill the places of the expatriates in due course. This strategy has worked to some extent, particularly in the newer universities and colleges that were opened in the regions. Most institutions are utilizing expatriates effectively and also send staff for further training. Almost all trainees sent to India have returned. Since 1994 over 550 students (including from other sectors) were sent to India for their first, second and third degrees through the Ministry of Education. This has contributed to tackle the problems of brain drain. There are few emerging initiatives to reverse brain drain into a brain gain through establishing networks with the Ethiopian diaspora.

A lot of investment has been made in human resource development, building necessary infrastructure, procuring teaching materials, books, equipment, machinery, laboratory equipment, etc. This is mainly aimed at improving and sustaining the quality of education and training while expanding the system. However, we had difficulties in designing buildings and preparing lists and specifications of items for procurement. Our strategy of rolling planning and implementation has rushed the activities without sufficient preparation (in terms of human resource, knowledge of procurement, etc) and has resulted in wastage and inefficient resource utilization in many areas. The shortage of skilled and competent human resource, both at the level of institutions and the Ministry, has largely contributed to these difficulties.

**Expanding access with equity**

The government began the expansion of higher education by taking into account disciplines that are critical for the socio-economic development of the country and in which scarcity of human resources is severe. Furthermore, geographic distribution and equity of regions, nations, and nationalities were also given due consideration. This was put in to practice by opening new institutions and strengthening existing programs as of 1994 in different parts of the country. By merging smaller tertiary institutions, four new universities were established in 2000 in different parts of the country. Special provisions (affirmative actions or positive discrimination policies) for female students and students from relatively underserved regions of Afar, Benishangul and Gumuz, Somali and Gambella were also implemented. Agreement has been reached with all institutions to reach 30% female participation by 2005.

Focus in expansion was given at the initial stage to the areas of engineering and technology, business and economics, health sciences and teacher education. These were further reinforced in the later stages of the expansion program. Diversification is also implemented through a policy of decentralization of university training in to the regions, which has resulted in the opening of four new universities and as many colleges.

Since 1994, the government has taken a positive step by allowing private and non-government organizations to invest and provide education and training, including higher education. The enormous potential of private institutions to provide cost-effective higher education is acknowledged by the government, and they have come to be considered as productive and relevant partners. The private providers are thereby encouraged to complement public institutions as a means of managing costs of expanding higher education enrolments, increasing the diversity of training programs, and broadening social participation in higher education. The major initiatives of the government were the issuance of
regulations allowing private investment in education and the general proclamation for encouragement and coordination of investment. The policy and regulatory framework of the government avoids disincentives such as tuition fee controls, includes an incentives package (tax holiday/exemptions, land provisions, removing procedural impediments, etc.) and mechanisms for accreditation, oversight and evaluation.

Resources and efficiency

Public higher education institutions in Ethiopia are solely dependent on the government budget. With the low development stage of the country, however, the budget allocation is limited and the financial burden of the expanding system on the government is increasingly becoming unbearable. Therefore, the reform agenda focuses importantly on diversifying financial resources and improving efficiency.

Ethiopian higher education institutions have very high administrative costs with low direct academic related costs. Their income generation activities are limited and constrained by limitations of regulations pertaining to the use of income. To date students are not paying or sharing any cost, including tuition, food and lodging. This has resulted in an extremely high government financing burden, high administration costs, low efficiency, and diversion of the leadership’s efforts from quality improvement. The reform envisages introduction of cost-sharing by beneficiary students, the encouragement of income generation and utilization, as well as improvements in efficiency.

The financial base of higher education can be strengthened by mobilizing a greater share of the necessary financing from students themselves, who can expect significantly greater lifetime earnings as a result of attending higher education. This has an impact on the quality of learning as students will put a positive pressure for increased accountability on the academic staff and administration. Cost-sharing, in the Ethiopian context, will be pursued by charging a certain proportion of the tuition fees and eliminating subsidies for non-instructional costs such as housing and meals. Although students are not required to pay any cost, tuition fees are estimated to account for about 15% of recurrent expenditure in public higher education in Ethiopia. Other costs (food, lodging, etc.) contribute to a further 15% to 20% of the overall institutional cost. The recovery mechanism adopted is a “graduate tax” scheme whereby beneficiaries are required to pay back the amount they owe the government in form of tax deducted from their income after graduation.

As a strategy to diversify financial resources, as well as meeting community services, the government is encouraging income generation activities such as short courses, contract research, consultancy services, farm activities and production services. To assist long term initiatives and wide range involvement in income generation, the higher education reform stipulates autonomy in the utilization of generated income from diversified sources. Furthermore, in the budgeting formula, incentives in the form of government matching funds are also included as a positive element.

With such incentives and conducive environments, public higher education institutions are expected to generate income covering not less than 20% of their total recurrent expenditure in the coming few years. Most higher education institutions are expected to achieve this target in a short time by increasing efficiency and by putting in place visionary leadership and management. It is well recognized that in addition to reducing their dependence on public financing and their vulnerability to budget fluctuations, the active mobilization of funds from non-government sources will make institutions more responsive and improve their efficiency.

The reform has also stipulated a “block grant” budgeting system for institutions of higher education. The block grant budget is anticipated to be allocated using a budgeting formula that utilizes criteria such as student numbers, type of programs of study, amount generated through income generating activities, etc. By getting out of the inflexible and strict line-item budgeting system, institutions will have a better
autonomy in the utilization of their budget and improve on efficiency. However, it is recognized that the block grant allocation system also requires careful and detailed planning, putting in place clear and transparent accountability mechanisms and decentralized management within the institution faculties. The proposal is welcomed by the higher education community and leaders and they are all ready to stand up to the challenges.

Ethiopia spends about 5.8% of its GDP on education sector development. This is higher than the Sub-Saharan Africa average which is around 3.9%. The annual budget allocation to the education sector has increased significantly over the past few years. It has grown from about 9% in 1997 to about 14% in 2002. However, this is still low compared to the African average of 20%. Of the total education budget, on average about 15% is allocated to higher education.

The capital budget investment for higher education in Ethiopia has increased from 118 million Birr in 1996/97 to about 600 million Birr in 2002/03. During the past few years the government of Ethiopia has invested significantly in its higher education sector towards increasing access, improving quality and relevance, and making the universities and colleges more responsive to the needs of the country. As noted above, rapid enrollment increases have been registered. However, with this increase the ability of the system to deliver quality graduates, research and community service is still not as much as desired.

Leadership and management

Without an efficient and adequate system of leadership and management, it is extremely difficult to provide education of a satisfactory quality. Leading and managing the sector commensurate with its mission and complexity is necessary as a prerequisite for the success of the reform and expansion initiative. Leadership at all levels (government, institutions of higher education, etc.) is required to demonstrate its vision, ability, adaptability, and change management skills. The government, as well as all stakeholders, has come to the understanding that leadership and management are the key to the success of the reform. The challenge and one of the arduous tasks confronted from the initiation of the reform has been how one can lead higher education institutions that seem in favor of reforms but allergic to change. This, therefore, requires creative, visionary and committed leadership; transparency in the working system; and ability to upgrade skills of managers and leaders, as well as the whole work force to bring it into a process of renewal and transformation. It is urgent to gear the system towards result-oriented delivering abilities and accountability.

The generally poor leadership and management of our higher education system, and the institutions in particular, have resulted in disappointing performances. These are attributed, among others, to poor resource mobilization, to high unit costs, poor supervision, misuse of personnel, inappropriate resource utilization, and the absence of an information system and organized management. Promoting greater efficiency in the management of higher education institutions has therefore become an important objective of the government. It is believed that evaluating and reorganizing the administrative structures and developing capacity of leaders and managers, revitalizing the governance and thereby improving efficiency with result-oriented delivery system, higher education institutions can do more with the resources at their disposal. New organizational and administrative structures were approved, new staff evaluation methods were introduced that involve students as major stakeholders, and new staff career and promotion as well as salary structures were put in place.

In order to improve efficiency, there is a push towards decentralization of management to the level of departments, which at the moment is only at the level of faculties in only few universities. To revitalize institutional governance, new board structures were put in place. Board members include regional government representatives (to assist local networking and close working relations with the community),
Building the capacity of leaders and managers, decentralization, and autonomy of decision-making (mainly administrative and financial) have become strategic factors of the reform agenda. In order to improve leadership and management capacity, short term trainings were given at least once a year with experts from the UK on issues of administering higher education, strategic planning in higher education, etc. It is also expected that government will organize consultations and experience-sharing (strengths, weaknesses, efforts to overcome difficulties, etc.) meetings at least twice a year among higher education institutions leaders (public and private).

Accountability to the institution’s community (students, staff, etc.) and the public at large is also an issue addressed by the reform. Accountability involves transparency, participatory management, and efficiency. The fundamental question of accountability revolves around who is to be held accountable, for what, to whom, through what means, and with what consequences. Putting in place mechanisms of accountability helps avoid arbitrary and corrupt power. It raises the quality of performance by forcing critical reflection on operations, and it raises the legitimacy and autonomy of the institutions. To this effect, mechanisms are put in place to evaluate the system’s leaders and managers, the teaching staff, etc. on a regular basis (at least twice a year). The evaluations are based on the implementation of planned activities and attainments of set goals as per the mission. The evaluations are open conferences whereby all stakeholders (leaders, teachers, staff and students) are involved. This approach has started to yield positive results in many of the institutions towards adapting to the real situations, changing and looking outside of the walls of the institutions, undertaking duties and responsibilities properly, and delivering as individuals, teams, and institutions.

The Higher Education Law

With a view to a better internal and external efficiency, and to evaluate the results in terms of the objectives and the means placed at the disposal of the institutions, it was necessary to provide a conducive environment and legal provisions to support this. This need compelled the government and the higher education community to design a comprehensive law with a coherent framework and strategies for attaining the development objectives. The draft law was discussed at the level of leaders of institutions, teaching staff and students, as well as the community of public and private institutions. Outcomes of the consultations with the stakeholders and community were used as the major issues and framework for the final draft submitted to the council of ministers and later to the Parliament. The Law was approved by Parliament in June 2003.

The Higher Education Law clearly shows objectives and expectations, accountability and autonomy of higher education institutions, how they generate internal income, how quality and relevance of programs will be evaluated internally and externally. The law provides for the establishment of a higher education strategic institute (EHESI) with a mission of developing visions, strategic directions, analyzing policies and strategies, and advising the government so that higher education in Ethiopia can deliver better. The law also provides for the establishment of a Quality and Relevance Assurance Agency (QRAA) to develop standards of quality and relevance, evaluate programs and institutions, and advise the Ministry on issues of accreditation and recognition.

The long-awaited administrative and financial autonomy is provided by the law. Institutions are now autonomous in relation to the recruitment, promotion and development of their administrative staff. Better performance is expected from the financial autonomy which gives institutions flexibility and autonomy in financial resource mobilization and utilization. Accountability mechanisms include
requirements for reporting, transparency and evaluations on the basis of plans of action and results thereof are also put in place.

**CHALLENGES AND CONSENSUS BUILDING TOWARDS REFORM**

Bringing about change, particularly in higher education settings, is a difficult task. In the past few years, however, encouraging and significant reforms have taken place. This is mainly due to the importance of consensus on purpose before embarking on new ventures by the government was not over-emphasized. The implementation of reforms before anyone discusses what they are for is one of the major reasons for the resilience and resistance of particularly the academic community. It was recognized by the government that it is important to secure the greatest possible consensus of the higher education community and relevant stakeholders to support any worthwhile ventures targeted on improving education quality and relevance, access and efficiency.

There is a strong need to ensure that the implications of the reform decisions are properly understood and implemented by every one concerned. Therefore, teamwork and proper consultation, both vertically and horizontally, were fostered from the early days of the reform. That is why permanent (at least twice a year) consultative meetings with heads of institutions and faculties has been designed by the government. This is helping to build consensus and ownership.

When the initial reform and expansion agenda was put forward by the government in the mid-1990s, there were mixed opinions and attitudes by the academia, the leaders of higher education institutions, and even a few in the government itself. The reform and expansion required not just a simple change but a serious transformation in the system together with significant expansion of access. Many were pessimistic in that they concluded, without giving alternatives, that expansion would be a compromise to educational quality maintained by the university system existing at the time. However, even with the elitist system of limited enrollments, the quality of higher education had been in decline for over a decade. Issues of political partisanship were overwhelmingly influencing academia. At its initial stage, the reform agenda was seen by many as a purely political issue, rather than as a development objective. The difficulty resided mainly in the silence and indifference (neither openly opposing it nor expressing support) of many in the higher education community towards the reform.

The effort to bring relevant stakeholders, and particularly the academic community, on board has faced several challenges and it is still confronting problems. This is why the role of leadership has become crucial and why consensus building has been given emphasis. The major challenge relates to the inadequate capacity, lack of transparency and participatory approach of the leadership and management of higher education institutions. Over the years, we have come to realize that consensus reached at the level of top management does not transpire effectively to the institution community. Although there are leaders who are visionaries in their participation, a few were and still are indifferent. They provide little inputs in the form of strengthening the reform or, if and where necessary, outlining alternative options. This has caused a delay in pacifying the policy and reform agenda to the stakeholders, mainly staff and students. In some areas leaders have played a significant role in perpetuating the idea that the status quo is the best option by not owning and explaining the benefits and of course the drawbacks and challenges of reform on which at least consensus was reached at the levels of the leaders of institutions. The higher education community – and in particular the leadership – were required to invest the time and energy necessary to halt the negative trends in the higher education system and to own the agenda.

One of the major purposes of reform has been to demonstrate the ability to be adaptable, open-minded, flexible and versatile. After repeated and continuous consultations and consensus-building efforts, the attitudes of many have changed and they have started to work hand in hand towards the goals of reform and expansion.
An environment permitting a pragmatic approach to the task of improving higher education has been created by promoting and sustaining political, social and economic awareness about the expansion and reform. This was achieved primarily through ownership of the agenda by the leadership at all levels (except a few institutional leaders and managers) and through the repeated discussions and consultations (at the level of leaders of institutions both public and private, higher education institution community, academic staff, students, etc.). It has resulted in a recognition of the decisive contribution good education can make to the badly needed overall development, poverty reduction, and progress of the country. Public debate is ongoing at all levels of institutions and the community at large, whereby all the stakeholders concerned (parents, students, educators, administration, industry, the private sector, etc) are contributing positively. Serious debate of this kind is necessary to avoid political point-scoring and to offer practical solutions geared to changing circumstances, providing objective quantitative and qualitative assessments that enable improvements and change to be fed back into the system.

Although the government has pioneered in this endeavor, the higher education institutions are increasingly required to sustain the undertaking so that the expansion and reform initiatives will succeed. Through ongoing evaluations of the institution based on the implementation of planned activities, the role of leaders, members of the community, and students as major stakeholders has started to lead institutions to become more responsive. The government, together with visionary and daring institution leaders and the higher education community, has worked hard so that the process of renewal and reform can begin to take root within the higher education institutions by seizing the initiatives and the opportunities themselves. The major constraint was not a lack of knowledge or a sense of what was required, but rather the inability and lack of willingness to take the necessary action.

**MAJOR LESSONS LEARNT**

Government leadership in designing, initiating, pursuing and following the implementation of expansion and reform in Ethiopian higher education has been found to be the key to the success of many of the initiatives. Therefore, in any reform initiative, at any level, visionary and committed leadership, together with the right policies and strategies and participatory interventions, will ensure attainment of goals. Undertaking sweeping reforms will succeed when there is a supportive external environment and when an innovative institutional context is developed and nurtured.

In order to seize the opportunity, our higher education system needs to develop an appropriate vision and to embrace change and transformation which are inevitable and necessary orders of the day. There is no favorable wind for those who do not know which direction they want to go.

Participation of all relevant stakeholders from the time policies emanate, develop and are implemented is important for the success of achieving the goals set out. In this respect, transparency in the overall undertakings is of paramount importance to bring on board the many skeptical academics or members of the higher education community and the public at large. Active involvement and participation at all stages will develop and ensure ownership of the reform agenda. It will also assist in inculcating creativity and innovation, and facilitate mobilization of the community for successful implementation of initiatives. The Ethiopian experience has shown that relying only on the top management will pay fewer dividends in such cases. Participation should go as deep as the level of department heads at institutional level. In some critical issues such as cost sharing and recovery, the contributions of the beneficiary students, parents, opinion leaders and the public at large are essential. Regular and consistent consensus building efforts are essential to bring many pessimists on board and for the success of any reform initiative.
Change management is a difficult task and requires visionary, daring and able leadership at all levels. It also requires a strong measure of persistence, dedication and hard work. The initiatives of the government were not viewed as opportunities by many institution leaders, particularly in the early stages, mainly because many cautious leaders would not dare to confront the challenges.

Re-orienting the attitude and enabling the capacity of the leadership and the community at large towards understanding the mission and vision of the sector should be at the center of the reform and expansion effort. We shall lead higher education institutions to a level where autonomous initiative, planning and long-term investments are encouraged and cultivated.

It may be argued that the reform has to generate relevant information and agendas for change before tackling regulatory provisions. However, to lead the reform successfully and with vision it is essential to issue policies, laws and relevant regulations before the start a reform activity. Laws and regulations are dynamic and can be reviewed, updated and adapted as necessary with inputs from the implementation and experience of the reform. The reform and expansion agenda would have a better chance of acceptance and the implementation of reforms would be more vigorously pursued, when stakeholders are involved at all levels. In our reform and expansion program, we initially relied on top leaders and managers of institutions, an approach which led to lost time and momentum. Therefore, it is necessary to involve all relevant stakeholders (teaching and administrative staff, students, etc) from the very initial stages of any reform and expansion program.

Although some persons suggest selecting few manageable reform activities in order to achieve success, it is also important to be ambitious. We, in Ethiopia, have lagged behind in development. We have no choice but to be ambitious and to undertake activities with a sense of urgency. This is undoubtedly the right direction in order for countries such as ours to unravel and utilize their immense potential.

CONCLUSIONS

Higher education has to constantly change and adjust to a wide variety of situations in the country, be they political, social, economic or cultural. It should not lose sight and speed and fall behind. It should not fall out of touch in relation to knowledge and the demands of the social, economic and political situations that lie outside of its walls.

Higher education is the most appropriate and, if rightly led, the prepared place to guide the future of our development. As such, it is an instrument of hope. Higher education must continue to be a centerpiece in the national capacity building, sustainable development, and poverty reduction endeavors of any government.

It is essential to establish autonomous bodies as mechanisms to ensure quality and relevance. Access to ICT should be given priority to strengthen institutions’ capacities, to improve the quality of teaching and learning, to develop and expand access through distance learning, to widen access, and to improve international linkages and cooperation.

We are losing our talent and highly skilled human resource, for each of whom we have paid dearly. Therefore, we must develop mechanisms of reducing the brain drain through building local human resource development capacity and improving living and working conditions. Dialogue on mobilizing the Diaspora for brain gain by our countries should also be pursued with vigor.

In Ethiopia, we have recognized that we have every imaginable crisis, and that we face all types of tragedies (human sufferings from famine, flood, civil wars and strives, poverty, HIV/AIDS and other diseases, etc.). Out of these adversities, crisis and challenges, we believe, shall come opportunities and
strength. We acknowledge that we have to seize the opportunities that emanate from these challenges, mobilize our human, financial and other resources to overcome the tragedies, and prepare a better world for our children. Above all, although late, we have the urgency that comes from knowing that we have to find solutions or we will sink and our very survival will be doomed.

A lot is expected from higher education to pull our countries out of the extreme poverty and underdevelopment. It has a unique role to play in this respect, and has to make itself relevant to deliver as per the challenging requirements of the society and the country. There is still a long way to go and a lot of expectations to meet from this generation. It is on our shoulders and we can and shall not run away from the challenges, but face them with courage and sense of urgency. We have to nurture, develop and revitalize our higher education systems. We largely know what is required to revitalize higher education institutions and make them key actors in national development. Now it is time to take the necessary actions with vigor, determination and commitment.

It would be appropriate to conclude the paper with a powerful message from the experience of the Masai from Kenya (Towards Unity for Health, 2002), a metaphor for battling the lions of higher education. “In Kenya, the native Masai men had to engage a lion in a battle as a rite of passage, a test of strength and courage, a ticket to full manhood, a lead-on to better experiences in life. Today we find ourselves seemingly like the Masai men stuck in some dilemma, confronting a lion of our own. We have an abundance of beautiful thoughts. Although some may be conflicting, the striking similarity is that these thoughts are for the better of our country and society. The lion we face, which takes the shape of our clashing thoughts and differing opinions, will eventually bring out the best in us. We shall muster courage, exude humility, and reveal the power of understanding. Understanding others to understand ourselves. Understanding ourselves to better understand others. The powerful cycle of understanding clears the path for acceptance. One lion is actually one too many. The Masai people do not aspire to have more lions on their way. Neither do we. One lion proves their full courage and demonstrates their bravery, rising up to the challenge, to the responsibility. We will also grow with that experience and the beginning of good times must be looming. We shall concur with others as a team. We shall conquer not others, but ourselves. When we concur together, we conquer. At present, only the lion's tail is evident and it is fast vanishing. Only a shadow remains on the horizon to remind us to persist in our concerted efforts to better our children's future.

THE AUTHOR

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