

**Proceedings of the Fifth National Conference
on
Private Higher Education
Institutions (PHEIs) in Ethiopia**

***Major Theme: Private Higher Education in Ethiopia
at the turn of the Ethiopian
Millennium***

**Organized & Sponsored
By
St. Mary's University College
August 25, 2007
UN Conference Center
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia**

Government Policies and Institutional Responsibilities of Private Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Private Higher Education provision which started in 1996 has come a long way in the very short period of its existence in Ethiopia. The policy of Education and Training subsequent education sector development programs, particularly the third ESDP, and the Higher Education capacity building strategies have highlighted, though sometimes in a passing, the importance of the private sector in Higher Education provision. It has accounted for about 24.8% of the 2004/5 overall (degree and diploma levels) enrolment and about 9.3% of the degree level enrolments of the national Higher Education system. It is currently providing access to a large number of the youth who could not join the public institutions, offering wide opportunities in terms of choice of programs, delivery modes (regular, evening, distance, etc.) and places of study.

The Private Higher Education Institutions have faced several challenges. The most critical among these, not necessarily characterizing all institutions, are declining student enrolment, particularly in some disciplines and institutions, limited capacity to fulfill requisite facilities and infrastructure, inability to expand mainly due to land problems, poor commitments to quality upkeep and enhancement, problems of meeting the expectations and/or satisfactions of the government and the society, and poor unity and utilization of their association to further objectives and influence stakeholders, including government.

However, there are sizeable number of institutions that have overcome these challenges through different mechanisms and won the trust of the students, parents, government and other stakeholders. There are also few that have failed to address the challenges of mainly playing their role of social responsibility and accountability.

The coming years would require both government and private providers to focus on meeting social demands and expectations in the higher education sector. The government is expected to provide more transparent and facilitating policies and strategies, as well as leveling the playing ground as it has done for other investment sectors in the last few years. On the other hand, private institutions are expected to focus on quality and relevance of curricula and courses, focus on producing responsible, knowledgeable and skilled citizens, and contribute to equitable access to Higher Education.

1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions, both public and private, have a covenant, tacit or otherwise, responsibility to educate people to be the hope of the future and be leaders and providers for the welfare of society. Government and society look up to the institutions of higher learning, and to the men and women who graduate from these institutions whenever plans and strategies of overall socio-economic and cultural development of our country are considered. Education is an investment in the future- the principal tool and the means of assisting both individuals and nations to shape their destinies. Enhancement of human resource capacity, individual status and improvement of the level of participation towards sustainable economic and social development is largely made possible through Higher Education. It is therefore reasonable to expect that Higher Education Institutions and their graduates have wide- ranging responsibilities societal and national expectations of question the real returns of their investment, the need to fulfill these expectations is all the more urgent and critical.

The development of Higher Education in Ethiopia in the last decade has been significant – significant in terms of expanding access, diversification of institutions and programs, and geographic distributions. The contribution of the Private Higher Education institutions in the development of the sector is no less significant. Despite the expanded access, every one of us would question the impact that increased access to Higher Education has had on the overall development of our communities. Many of us often rise doubts as to the quality and relevance of the curriculum offered, question the commitment of graduates to social services and national goals, and doubt their readiness and maturity to take on the challenges of leadership in this increasingly complex environment. It is because we all grapple with these challenges and face the rumblings that I welcome the opportunity given to me here today to speak to a receptive, reflective and potentially proactive gathering. However, I can not address all issue possibly covered within the topic. It I indeed a tall

order to attempts that with my stature in the quality of education and training offered in Higher Education Institutions and their graduates.

Access to the increasing demand for Higher Education could not be fulfilled only by the investment in public institutions. In principle, I believe, with requisite follow-up and support Private Higher Education Institutions should be further encouraged to flourish with a mission to produce quality citizens. In this respect, several policies and strategies of the government have been instrumental in furthering the development of the Higher Education and specifically the Private Higher Education provision in Ethiopia. This will lead me to the first major theme of this paper-the policies of government.

2. Government Policies and Strategies

No one can deny that expansion of both Public and Private Higher Education Institutions and programs have taken place in an unprecedented pace, geographic distribution and program diversification. That has been witnessed since the adoption of the Education and Training policy in 1994 and the liberalized free-market economic and investment policies.

The education and training policy has stressed the importance of the private sector in expanding access and providing quality education and training, mainly by encouraging non-governmental organization to establish training programs (article 3.6.4), and that government will create the necessary conditions to encourage and give support to private investors to open schools and establish various educational and training institutions (article 3.9.6). Like wise, the Capacity Building Strategy and Programs indicates the need to encourage non-governmental organizations in establishing and providing Higher Education (page 189) to support the strategies of building capacity for successful national capacity building. Further more, the plan for accelerated and sustained Development to End poverty (PASDEP), Ethiopia's guiding strategic framework or the 2005/06-2009/10 period,

has also highlighted the importance of the Private Higher Education Institutions toward meeting the planned expansion strategy.

The question may be how much these provisions were understood and implemented by various entities of Federal and Regional governments. Generally, with in their frame works both the implementation of the policies and the operation of the privet institutions are not without their specific flaws.

As much as there are large number of Federal and Regional government bodies that wholeheartedly support and assist the development of the private sector, there are many government entities and support units that do not appreciate the social and public responsibilities and contributions of these institutions.

The major problem may be associated with the perception that these institutions are for-profit and do not need any so perceived special support from a public body. This has also been exacerbated by the behaviors and activities of may institutions, as few were and are focusing on profit making rather than shaping a generation of leaders and professionals. This has largely contributed to failure to address may of the challenges of the institutions. These, in my opinion, may have resulted in the reversal of several positive towards support.

The Higher Education Proclamation provides for the establishment and support of privet providers of higher education and mechanisms to ensure quality and relevance of the education and training given by these providers. It has clearly articulated the objectives (article 6) and powers and duties (article 14) of higher education institutions, which also apply to the private ones,

In general, the Education and Training policy and the Higher Education proclamation are expectations from a higher education institution. These tand another theme of this paper are responsibilities of the institutions.

3. Institutional Responsibilities of PHEIs

It is relevant and worth mentioning few statements from the policies of the government in relation to the discussion topic-responsibility. The following are but few major extracts:

- The education and Training policy states that education provided need to promote democratic culture, tolerance and peaceful reconciliation of differences and that raises the sense of discharging societal responsibilities (art. 202.9). Furthermore, it states that education shall (a) provide citizens who possess national and international.
- The Higher Education proclamation envisages that institutions need to provide higher education and social service compatible with the needs and development of the country (art. 2.2.14); (b) enable students become problem solving professional leaders in their fields of study and in overall societal needs (art. 3.24).
- The Higher Education Proclamation envisages that institutions need to provide higher education and social service compatible with the needs and development of the country (art. 6/5); and make efforts to develop and disseminate culture of respect, tolerance and living together among people (art. 6/8).

How much do higher educational institutions in Ethiopia clearly set set their missions towards contributing to societal development and service, as stipulated in the policies above? Do they wholeheartedly pursue the fulfillment of economic, social and political rights of people? Are the curricula, programs and other activities designed to respond to the needs of the society at large? Do they fulfill their obligation to offer academic programs of the highest standards, suitable to the professional needs and aspirations of their students, and by extension the society and the country? Does the faculty meet their responsibility of fulfilling their functions and academic roles with competence, integrity and to the best of their abilities, and in accordance with ethical values? Do the faculty and administration strive to inculcate the spirit of tolerance towards differing opinions, views

and positions, and enhance democratic culture? One could continue with more lists of inquires to seek answers to chart our future while helping institutions meet their responsibilities.

The issue of institutional responsibility of higher educational institutions, and by extension that of university graduates, has been the subject of debate, studies and reports. Institutional responsibility of providing equitable access, producing quality graduates, preparing them for the world of work, service to society and leadership are critical. Contribution to society through relevant research and studies is no less important. Some studies indicate that graduates lack exposure and preparations for the real situations after graduation. They even indicate he graduates lack concern for other, for society and their country, reasoning that they appear to be focusing on money and power with little regard to changing conditions around them and showing little readiness to face societal challenges. Others counter these assertions by saying that graduates are willing to serve the society; to give back what the society has given them but can not find ways to serve or the space and the opportunity to do so.

There is a lot to be desired from higher education institutions in terms of ensuring equity of access. Equity of access is not only about the access and completion of women and disadvantaged groups of society. It is also related to how much the higher educational institutions strive to reinforce their link with other levels of education. This is one weak area where our institutions have largely failed to should responsibility. Other important areas where institutions have not fulfilled their responsibilities include inability to create, advance and disseminate knowledge and preserve and promote cultures through research; educate citizens for active participation in society (life long learning); and foster partnership with the world of work. Many institutions are occupied in the teaching and learning processes with a largely neglected research wing. All theses, however, are related, in my opinion, and hopefully you would agree, to whether higher education institutions are effectively fulfilling their missions of social responsibility or not.

By the time our students enter the workforce, they will be expected to hit the ground running and to function in a situation dominated by the specter of challenges. They face challenges of poverty, food insecurity, natural resource degradation, resource misuse and mismanagement, ineffective governance, corruption, and generally changing times and increasingly competitive situations. In this time of unprecedented changes and expectations, technological advancements also increasingly dictate the pace at which we live our lives and manage our work as society is driven towards becoming more knowledge-based. This makes higher education institutions more central as a strategic resource educating and training people that create and /or utilize knowledge effectively and provide the necessary leadership. The responsibilities of higher education institutions are therefore no longer confined to their immediate environment.

Parents, students, as well as the larger public are increasingly investing in higher education charting the future. Life long learning is becoming a necessity for all. Products of higher education institutions will be required to continuously adjust to and address pressing societal problems, not only with their technical and professional ability, but also with enlightened leadership skills and preparations. So, institutions have the responsibilities to prepare students to lead us with vision, with their feet firmly on the ground. The caliber and commitment of the teaching staff, the quality and relevance of the curricula, programs and delivery, the capacity and standard of facilities and infrastructure and the extra curricular activities that inculcate relevant values and skills become critical to fulfill these responsibilities, which institutions are expected to discharge.

Private higher education institutions need to recognize, readjust and fulfill their social responsibility in terms of providing quality and relevant education and training, inculcating democratic culture, sense of social responsibility and proactive leadership skills in their graduates; and prepare them appropriately for their evolving responsibilities. This is why, in the opening paragraph of this paper, I said, society will call upon the higher education

institutions to prepare their students to rise to challenges. Higher education institutions and their communities, including the management, are increasingly required to keep close to our hearts and minds that we need to educate and train our students with sense of responsibility – as these students will be our leaders, source of inspiration and pride. Who needs ineffective, un – inspired and reactive leaders? Who wants to see graduates with no sense of social purpose and contract? Who does not want self – fulfillment? I believe none of us would like to see and have such leaders. We all want to have self –fulfillment could only come if and only if we have a social responsibility and contract to serve for the betterment of the society. It is my firm belief that private, as well as public higher education institutions, will fully and timely It is my firm belief that private, as well as public higher education institutions, will fully and timely recognize our central role, come to grips with the daunting tasks and deliver as per expectations of society with a sense of purpose. There is always a shift in the landscape of higher education and a shift in societal sense demands - we need to constantly adjust and meet these demands and changing challenges.

In **Conclusion**, the private sector needs to be encouraged with appropriate support, guidance and follow up, and not control, as genuine development partner in the higher education expansion and development program of the country. Policies should not be directed towards control and discouragement. Rather they should embody a public- private partnership for the betterment of the system and its contribution to societal development.

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