



**Ethiopian Private Higher Education and the Pursuit of Social Responsibility**

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## ***Ethiopian Private Higher Education and the Pursuit of Social Responsibility***

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### **Abstract**

It is to be taken for granted that the university serves as a handmaiden to the burgeoning internationalization of scholarly communication and of knowledge in general. But it is also founded within particular cultures and embedded in a specific society and it is the child of the communities in which it is set. Because higher education is a public service and education a social good, the university has a public duty not only to go beyond its academic agenda and broaden its extra-curricular services deep into the realm of social and community life, but also to protect and advance local cultural, intellectual and scholarly traditions. They have also the responsibility to respect the rights of the consumers of their services with exemplary ethical integrity and moral concern.

In spite of this, however, Ethiopian higher education institutions, both private and government, have failed to satisfactorily live up to fulfilling their social responsibility that may include, *inter alia*, spearheading socio cultural endeavours, nurturing the accumulation of social capital, safeguarding social justice, promoting environment protection, advocating social and political debates, designing conflict resolution mechanism, etc. They have also succeeded very little in providing good quality and socially relevant research and teaching services as well as in their socially crucial responses to the threats and opportunities posed by globalization.

It is worth remarking, however, that some private colleges in the country have made a good start in fulfilling their social responsibilities in some areas like the promotion of environmental sanitation programs, the organization of research and discussion forums, the promotion of sports activities, and the like; but still, a more aggressive civic engagement is lacking.

With the above background and theoretical notes, this paper attempts to address the extent to which private higher education institutions in the country especially those operating in Addis Ababa are pursuing social responsibility as a fundamental principle.

In more specific terms, the paper explores into the extent of the sense of moral responsibility and ethical concern which Private Higher Education Institutions are exercising towards the consumers of higher education services as public goods; this will be done using such variables like quality, pertinence, finance and management, international cooperation/competition as well as the attempt to massify higher education and other related variables as gauges of the pursuit of social responsibility.

The paper also attempts to look into the depth of engagement of Private Higher Education Institutions both as participants and leaders in promoting social, cultural, economic and to some extent, political activities that directly benefit the general public. More philosophically, this refers to the utilitarian gestures these

institutions extend to the larger public as a practical expression of gratitude to the society to whom they owe their very *raison d'être*.

A semi-structured questionnaire is used to collect information from colleges selected on the basis of stratified random sampling technique. The data collection is further enriched through observations, group discussions, and reviews of documents, where available.

Finally, following critical interpretations and some percentage descriptions of the findings, the paper makes suggestions that would help these institutions strive better to get engaged in championing this responsibility and be able to avail their services to the society in which they have been germinated to the level of expectation and ultimately be able to “survive” in this competitive world of fast evolving academic breakthroughs and scholarly excellence.

### ***I. Introduction***

The ancient university was an ivory tower where the sage had a possibility to engage himself in studies relevant only to him. People respected the sage because he was seen to have knowledge of the unknown. Today, the modern university can flourish if it lives in genuine interaction with the society at large. Today, people’s respect does not come as easily as before; universities must earn it by yielding to the service of their supporters as taken from a speech made by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Natal, South Africa.

Happily gone are the days when the intellectual and his institution stand as secluded whimsical islands in the midst of a mammoth crowd of illiterate and semi-literate people and when the university which is otherwise implanted in the social milieu was lamentably devoid of community flesh and blood. Many have echoed their concern of this archaic and outmoded fad whereby the apparently all-knowing scholarly demigod lives in his own fancy world swaddled in an impermeable envelope of cognitive pride oblivious of the society which otherwise nourished and fathered him. De Wulf in his philosophical treatise (1907: 153), writes in wonder of the intellectuals of his day "what general social influences could these men wield who closed their doors and windows against the outside world, and philosophised without the least heed for the dominants (challenges) of the time." Such orientations still hold true in most universities of the world and in some contexts have even worsened given the geometric gap in knowledge made possible by the information technology.

Ethiopia has not been and is not an exception to this global scenario. Tekeste (1996:101-102) writing on how modern education started in Ethiopia made the accurate observation that our education system came into being through European and American scholars and very few foreign-educated Ethiopians. Under such historically inevitable influences, it was only natural that it

evolved as a fragile “plant” made up of parts imported from multiple Western cultural and knowledge packages glued together, hence, by and large, lacking Ethiopian touches, tastes and colours (Girma 1973:3); the staff profile and curricular portfolio of our education system especially the higher education one, *ipso facto*, ended up as the carbon copies of Western universities. This state of affairs coupled with the consistent lack of dynamism and relevance of the curriculum has effectively dissociated our higher education system from the general public and compounded its failure to reflect the changing demands, constraints and values of our society.

The near-global university-society polarization has, for long, been the concern of policy-makers, researchers, the public, and even universities themselves before it metamorphosed into a consensus to pursue social responsibility as a fundamental university virtue.

Accordingly, at the International UNESCO conference that convened in 1950 in Nice, the universities of the World stipulated three indivisible missions for which every university should stand, namely: the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search for truth may lead; the tolerance of divergent opinion and freedom from political interference; and the obligation as social institutions to promote through teaching and research the principles of freedom and justice of human dignity and solidarity, and to develop mutually material and moral aid on an international level. This argument enjoys a number of solid justifications. Primarily, this institution is founded within a particular culture and embedded in a specific society and it is the child of the community in which it is set. Hence, communities own and have every natural right to dictate their course. If one agrees with the premise that the university is indeed the power source of development, then society is the agent that fuels and greases and runs its operations. It is at the same time the beneficiary of its academic and non-academic exploits. This argument boils down to the assertion that the universities on their part whether public-owned or private-owned, have to be vigilant of the rhythm of change in societal demands and constraints. With that background, this study attempts to address the role private higher education institutions in the country are playing in pursuing the multi-faceted responsibilities expected of them. It then reminds these Institutions to pay a more credible attention to the pursuit of social responsibility as a university principle and hopefully open the door for a more profound and methodologically seasoned exploration of the issue in the future. The study would also implicitly invoke a self-critical and inquisitive sense in government-owned higher education institutions to evaluate their current position vis-à-vis this virtue.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The paper focuses on Private Higher Education Institutions expressly refraining from indulging into the perilous excursion of treating the realm of government-owned higher education. The underlying reasons are two-fold: primarily, if government-owned higher education institutions are included in the equation, the analytical variable that we end up with would be the political facet of social responsibility, hence undermining the attempt to capture and appreciate the composite picture of social responsibility, in both conceptual and pragmatic terms. Put bluntly, nominal university autonomy plus fragile academic freedom plus a highly politicized university administration and management that characterize government-owned higher education in Ethiopia today would tell the whole story.

Secondly, the treatment of the issue of social responsibility would yield more valuable outcomes if discussed from the perspective of the private-owned higher education system which is a fast-developing and hence a potentially potent engine of socio-economic transformation.

The selection of colleges and universities for this study was done on the basis of stratified random sampling technique. The first stratum is formed by the relatively old, populous and hence more experienced colleges (universities), while the other consists of the relatively young and specialized colleges (universities). All of these institutions, eight in total, are found in Addis Ababa.

For collecting the necessary data, a semi-structured questionnaire that is composed of both closed and open-ended question items was distributed to the selected colleges. Review of documents especially the curriculum of so few of these colleges, informal discussions with college staff and students and a series of field observations were also used to enrich the data. The information so collected was analyzed using mainly qualitative critical interpretations and percentage descriptions.

## **3. Ethiopian Private Higher Education: An Overview**

The private provision of higher education in Ethiopia is a recent phenomenon though it showed a very dramatic expansion within a span of very few years, about 40 percent between 1999/2000 and 2001/2002. Today, 21 % of the nation's higher education enrolment is covered by the 73 private colleges and institutes of which 18 have been accredited since 1989EC. Three of these institutions are not-for-profit institutions. The majority of these institutions are quite new and enrol 500 students or less, and offer training in specialized areas such as Accounting, Business Administration, or Information Science. The remainder range in size from 1000 students up to a maximum of 7,100 students (World Bank 2003:11).

All private colleges offer diploma programs, Half-a-dozen of them have mounted degree programs; most of them offer distance courses. These institutions offer diverse educational programs often not available in public institutions such as Dentistry and Photography. They provide access to growing numbers of students who might have otherwise not be admitted to tertiary education. What is more, they enable a significant expansion of tertiary enrolments at very little additional cost to government.

The sources of funds for running these institutions are almost exclusively obtained from tuition fees; the latter range between Birr 2,500 to 3,500 per student per year. In fact, as Wondwosen (2003) observes, this linear reliance on student fees is a potential threat to the renovation and expansion drive of the country's Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). In a further argument, he attributes this to the fact that the private sector, which may include industries and other employing sectors, lacks the strength and has not yet fully developed the culture of providing contributions and donations to PHEIs.

According to the World Bank report cited above, private colleges teach 3 out of 4 Business students and other 3 out of 4 Computer Science students, and nearly half of all Law students in the country.

The path private higher education had to traverse was not, however, a bed of roses. From licensure to accreditation, these institutions had to break through a litany of bureaucratic bottlenecks and procedural ups and downs. They were also plagued by other equally important problems such as the lack of clarity regarding the import tax exemption they are reportedly entitled to for the importation of instructional materials and by the complications associated with obtaining loan financing for expansion because of the lack of tangible collateral. All private colleges except one do not have their own buildings and still operate in rented buildings in an adverse academic environment at the side of busy streets grappling with noisy pedestrians and roaring vehicles. In a recent interview held with the English Weekly *perspective*, the President of St. Mary's College complained of the government's failure to respond to his repeated requests for land for securing his own buildings that are designed and constructed with the requisite academic aptness. The President also disclosed that he was forced to pay an annual rental fee of over Birr 1 million for a single campus (*Perspective* 2004).

It is worth noting that the private education institutions that are mushrooming today securing their work permits in quite a short time have a lot to owe to those pioneering institutions that braved the plethora of government-driven political accusations and erratic bureaucratic requirements; those institutions had to walk on pins and needles to break through the thick iceberg of adamant

government reluctance to officially accept private provision of higher education as a public good, which was only a lingering legacy of communist obsession with public ownership (Patrick 2003). The unswervingly dear sacrifices these institutions had made proved to be an effective antidote to the ubiquitous change inertia which was a poignant amalgam of robust state resistance and mostly unfounded qualms from an uninformed (ill-informed) public. Private education institutions that are currently enjoying a relative peace from the government tug and pull at the dear expenses of their forerunners ought to maintain a higher degree of institutional integrity and ethical accountability and refrain from any free rider mentality.

#### **4. Discussion of Findings**

Universities are said to have three indivisible missions: teaching, research and public service. Social Responsibility as a generic term is a university virtue that runs through all these three functions.

The issue of social responsibility, which we will be discussing in the pages that follow in the context of our Private Higher Education Institutions, will have two indivisible sides as in a coin. The first refers to the sense of moral responsibility and ethical concern Private Higher Education Institutions ought to exercise towards the consumers of higher education services as public goods. This responsibility, which is legally enforceable, is manifested in the quality and relevance of the curriculum to dynamic national and international realities as well as in a university's sensitivity to respect and advance the rights of its students, staff and the general public. This notion may also include the role higher education institutions play as "a model for society, a haven of honesty and accountability," as well as sentinels of the social-cum-cultural values of the community in whose bosom they germinate and grow. This role is appropriately highlighted in one of the accreditation criteria of private higher education institutions in the country suggested by the World Bank (2003: 101) which reads: "the institution exemplifies, and advocates high ethical standards in the management of its affairs and in all dealings with students, faculty, staff, external agencies and organizations, and the general public".

The second aspect deals with what the French call *responsabilité civique* (*civic responsibility*). Basically, this consists of a cocktail of social, cultural, economic and, to some extent, political activities in which Private Higher Education Institutions ought to get engaged by virtue of their being a child of the society in which they are founded. More philosophically, this refers to the utilitarian duties they execute as a practical expression of gratitude to the society to whom they owe their very *raison d'être* and the great deal of nourishment they have constantly been receiving there from.

Society evaluates the breadth of its universities' pursuit of the first dimension of social responsibility referred to above, which is a legally enforceable one, mainly from four angles: pertinence, quality, management and financing and international cooperation/competition (UNESCO 2003).

Pertinence may be defined as the degree of convergence between what society expects and what the university is able to do. In other words, this aspect defines the overall social relevance of a given institution. In a higher education context, this facet of social responsibility finds expression through, but not limited to, the relevance and dynamism of the overall program, curricular contents and research. Therefore, maintaining a socially pertinent, academically dynamic and contextually appropriate curriculum is by itself a fulfilment of the role of social responsibility, while the express failure to do so may be construed as an evasion of this virtue.

On the other hand, research has to be accorded a serious regard and should form part of the job description of academic staff. As an emphatic reminder of the significance of research for a higher education institution, writers in the area recommend that academic staff commit at least one-fourth of their time for research. However, committing sufficient time for research cannot in and by itself lead to fruition; the quality of the research is what counts most in the final analysis. Research need not only be an area for showing off one's scholastic elegance and academic perfection, but more importantly, it needs to give priority to national problems and its outputs have to be socially valuable. Research has to be oriented in such a way that society owns its process as well as its outcomes.

The issues surrounding the pertinence of the curriculum and research undertakings are also reflected in our discussion of "quality", which demonstrates to society the extent to which individual institutions are meeting the high standards expected of them. As in the following discussion, the first and most important aspect of social responsibility of higher education institutions, whether private or government-owned, should be able to design curricula that reflect national and international realities and values. Should one condemn the government if it refuses giving away a licensure to a college that wants to set up an aeronautics college, which is but a tragically uncanny move and a badly misplaced investment in our contemporary context?

In both respects of quality and pertinence, the fundamental responsibility society expects the university to assume is to reflect the changes society itself faces and, in turn, the capacity of the university to identify, distinguish and prioritise between them in a manner acceptable and beneficial to society always dictated by altruistic drives. After all, an account of their pursuit of knowledge production and their role in creating the cream of societies, universities are furthering



the virtue of social responsibility. In their attempt to adapt themselves to changes in the environment and their contribution to the employment market, they are promoting social transformation. In this regard, the question they need to address would be whether they are capable of concentrating on what is socially beneficial and still bear fruit and make constant revisits to their program and curriculum and accordingly cut-off the barren branches; these refer to disciplines that may be pursued on account of the relative ease with which they can be offered and the relatively low level of difficulty they pose to staff in terms of resources and skill requirements even when these disciplines are not readily sellable in the job market and hence are socially irrelevant. This state of affairs might happen naturally because of the information asymmetry that prevails between university academia which can easily forecast the way job markets move in the future with relative precision and the knowledge thirst student corps that has a shallow comprehension of such issues. The point is that the numberless secondary school graduates who have failed to join the government owned higher education system may be anxious to grab whatever higher educational opportunities as the key to social mobility are available at the sheer mercy of the private college. It has succinctly been observed that some private colleges have made unwholesome gains by enrolling eager students without even fulfilling the minimum criteria required for providing higher education services.

The above scenario takes us to the discussion of another crucial aspect of the pursuit of social responsibility: the social implications of the pursuit of the different aspects of social responsibility to the post-graduate scenario, namely to the world of employment. That is the question of what percentage of Ethiopian private college leavers is employed, underemployed or misemployed, which is a direct reflection of the efforts, academic or otherwise, that are exerted by colleges to make their students readily sellable in the labour market. Some of the interventions to this effect may be in the areas of curricular revision, job search counselling, employment market research, office practice and apprenticeship arrangements, etc. Although exact figures cannot be presented here, some graduates from some of the accredited colleges have secured employment and most of the working students who graduated from the night extension programs secured promotion in their respective workplaces. On the other hand, graduates of some colleges who enrolled in anticipation of future accreditation and which subsequently failed to secure the accreditation on time failed to secure employment.

The gap between graduation and employment has serious social implications. To begin with, an army of unemployed graduate force may in the long run be a cause for social instability as the situation tends to widen the gap of government legitimacy. The deterioration of human knowledge that accompanies the gap has also huge social costs because of the inevitable *brain recycling* in

switching to occupations that are totally irrelevant to one's qualification with adverse efficiency ramifications; worse still, the delay compounds the likelihood of never getting employed again which might in turn probably lead to a massive brain drain scenario (Shimelis 2003:201).

Secondly, the gap reinforces frustration that automatically leads to graduate underemployment that entails a high social cost because of surplus schooling or over education and because of the unethical workplace behaviour it might engender. A study has shown that underemployment and the feeling of being overeducated for the job and the attendant state of underpayment is one of the motivators of corruption in the country (Shimelis 2004: 20). Most of the private colleges studied were found to have made considerable efforts at arranging work practices and apprenticeships, and some said that they have at times made aggressive lobbying and job searching efforts for their graduates.

A related measure of the pertinence and quality of a higher education system's curricular system that has tremendous implications to social change is its aptitude to inculcate a sense of humility and patriotic sentiments. Hence, its potential to prepare graduates who are committed to engaging in services that benefit the poor and the vulnerable. Very unfortunately, our universities, whether government-owned or private-owned, have only succeeded in fabricating a mass of amorphous graduates that are apathetic to rural engagements and have thereby deprived society of what it mostly desires: models of altruism and interested service (Shimelis 2003: 7). Sisay Wagnev (2004: 14) in his recent newspaper article writes: "our graduates search for office jobs with sophisticated rolling chairs, computers, telephone and the internet." Concurrent to our argument, he attributes this situation to "...the barren education system that cast-off other suitable qualities like responsibility, altruistic vision and other compulsory societal values." This argument seems to make a good point in that it is the whole education system that is to blame for this state of affairs. The fact is that it is also at the secondary level that this urban employment mania begins to crystallize. The colleges simply inherit an already malformed moral figure and further erode his/her ideals of humility and fill him/her with a sense of self importance and cognitive pride (Teshome 1993). Further strengthening this line of argument is that enrolments in Agricultural fields in the country's tertiary systems constitute only 7% of the total tertiary enrolment, compared to 33% and 26 % enrolments in mostly urban bound Business/Economics and Education programs, respectively. It is worth noting that this figure is the lowest in the case of private colleges which is an indication of their stronger urban-bias (Please refer to table-1 on page 8). Therefore, the curricular malaise seems to concern even the lower levels of the education system and hence the remedy towards making the curriculum more morally appealing needs also to address these levels.

In a very similar tone, the higher education curriculum seems to have failed to instil an entrepreneurial spirit in the minds of graduates, which is a much needed ingredient in an otherwise budding free economy like ours but with limited public employment choices. A recent study by Samuel (2003) has revealed that the public is not yet satisfied with the job creating ability of the graduates from the private institutions. As a way out, he qualitatively suggests that “institutions would do well if they were to concentrate on such courses that would sharpen the entrepreneurial skills of their prospective graduates”. With regard to job market orientation, the MOE has set a good precedent worth-emulating by the Private Higher Education system by undertaking a preliminary analysis<sup>1</sup> of the labor force requirements in relation to the need for educational training and skill preparation. As a complementary strategy, the World Bank has suggested that Ethiopia like some other countries consider the possibility of creating a “higher education labour market observatory” for this purpose (World Bank 2003: 15).

There is now a set up “autonomous” Quality Assurance and Relevance Agency apparently for the task of assessing the quality and social relevance of private higher education institutions. The agency is believed to “allow government to take advantage of the additional access and resources they (Private Higher Education Institutions) can contribute, provide incentives to private institutions that meet accreditation standards, and protect the public from fraudulent and questionable quality providers that have plagued many other countries” (World Bank 2003: 62). There is, however, a general concern among private providers of education that the agency may lack the proper institutional autonomy and /or professional competence to take up the rather gruelling responsibility of measuring and appraising such an illusive notion like quality; equally worrying is the fear of the agency’s being excessively control-oriented (Belay and Wondwosen 2003). That this quality watchdog can really exercise genuine and consistent consumer protection remains to be seen. But if this is indeed the case, both the general public and the private provider will benefit. The public would benefit from the enforcement processes that would bring about “truth in advertising” and that would “monitor learning achievement and shore up sagging standards when they are detected”, and more importantly, from the provision of improved quality higher education services. There are not so few private higher education institutions that have played foul and enrolled hundreds of eager and frustrated higher education aspirants without even securing a licensure.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey, to be conducted at least once every three years, is said to collect information on job vacancies, salary structures, unemployed graduates, tracer study comparisons of public and private university graduates, employer satisfaction with graduate employees, demand for specific skills, etc.

In fact in one of the standards of accreditation suggested by the World Bank (2003: 101), it is stressed that “in presenting itself to students and other members of the interested public, the institution provides information that is complete, accurate and clear.” For the private provider, it would create a legitimate and vocal mechanism to demonstrate to a rather suspicious public that it meets appropriate standards as degree or diploma granting institution. This is in these two respects where in our discussion of social responsibility that this agency fits: as a liaison that would help galvanize the university-society coalition and that would, in ethical terms, enforce the social contact necessary for the pursuit of the virtue of social responsibility as this agency is entrusted with the strategic function of accreditation. The World Bank has thankfully incorporated the need for private higher education institutions to uphold social responsibility as a university virtue in the standards for accreditation that it has recently suggested to the government. One of the standards worth mentioning requires the existence of a mission and statement of purposes. The same criteria also establishes that “it (the mission) should be appropriate to higher education, the institution’s distinctive character, addresses the needs of society, and identifies the students it seeks to serve in a realistic way. The mission must include teaching, research, and public service” (World Bank 2003: 101).

In light of the following discussion, an enriched adaptation of the “Total Quality Approach”, which stresses broad participation, constant improvement, organizational learning and a focus on the customer, would have been an ideal quality assurance mechanism, especially as regards social responsibility, in addition to the “Reputation” and “Outcomes Approaches” currently in use, which by and large lack social concoction (Cloete 1997: 2).

In an attempt to gauge the extent of pertinence and quality, a quick document review of the curricula of some of the private colleges vis-à-vis the prevailing labour market demand and what may possibility prevail in the foreseeable future therein has shown that these institutions have outsmarted their government counterpart. The reason is mainly because of their effective application of the ‘market strategy’ and hence because of their need-based program orientation. In fact, they have accomplished what their aged “ivory tower’ counterpart has for long failed to accomplish by offering a variety of programs which are otherwise highly needed in the job market. According to a recent World Bank report, these institutions have succeeded in providing “client-oriented instruction focused on the shifting needs of the job market, and attract a high proportion of women students (almost 50%)” (World Bank 2003: 11).

An analytical glance at the statistics in table-1 below reveals a relevant story. The number of tertiary enrolments in Business/Economic and Computer Science programs far outnumbers the

enrolments in other programs. And these enrolments are the highest in Private Colleges and Evening Public programs. It is also noteworthy that bright prospects of employment reside in these disciplines. A 2001 survey of 192 employers in seven regions of the country found that employers encountered the greatest difficulty recruiting new staff in the areas of Business Administration, Engineering, Computer Science and Law (Budu, 2002). This researcher remembers his own experience of becoming a chemist-turned- auditor after the office he was employed in allowed him to attend conversion courses in Accounting during the period when the demand for Business graduates reached its climax in the 1990's.

*Table 1: Distribution of Tertiary Enrolments by Academic Program, 2001/20023*

<i>Programs</i>	<i>Fields of Study</i>									<i>Total</i>
	<i>Social Science</i>	<i>Business/Economics</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Law</i>	<i>Health</i>	<i>Science</i>	<i>Technical/Engineering</i>	<i>Agriculture</i>	<i>Other*</i>	
<i>Public Degree</i>	3,164	1,774	3,935	661	1,975	2,445	4,530	2,948	347	21,779
<i>Public Diploma</i>	0	2,556	3,865	88	2,065	175	906	1,691	299	11,645
<i>Evening</i>	976	10,846	16,088	1,024	1,779	768	4,547	1,924	1,252	39,204
<i>Private</i>	0	15,271	30	730	123	0	875	85	1,977	19,091
<i>Total</i>	4,140	30,447	23,918	2,503	5,942	3,388	10,858	6,648	3,875	91,719
<i>Percent</i>	5	33	26	3	6	4	12	7	4	100

*\*More than half of this figure represents Computer Science students*

**Source: MOE (Education Statistics Annual Abstract, 2001/2002).**

With regard to research, except for some excellent exceptions, Private Higher Education Institutions have shown exceedingly feeble progress partly given the costly and technical nature of the research enterprise and partly because of their lack of rudimentary awareness on their central role as driving and packaging agents of research. Incidentally, this researcher expresses his grave disappointment of the way some of the private colleges approached for this study reacted when they were asked for research information; it is a bemoaning anomaly for an institution of higher learning which is otherwise the nucleus and reservoir of a country's knowledge treasures to decline to fill out a research questionnaire even on an issue that is pertinent to its cause. This is perhaps a living case in point of the deplorable status of research as an important university enterprise in Ethiopian Private Higher Education and may partly apply also to the the Government Higher Education System; it is this partly nation-wide pursuit of research that Damtew (2004: 6) rightly dubbed as the "missing antidote" in Ethiopia's pursuit of its higher education vision.

The other variable that can be used to gauge an institution's social responsibility is "Management and Financing". These constitute the means and procedures by which the individual institution

prioritizes the expectations society has expressed in the light of the means society provides for their execution (UNESCO 2003: 7). More specifically, it refers to the institution's system of governance which is expected to espouse managerial proficiency, procedural consistency and ethical integrity both vis-à-vis its own internal community and external users; this aspect may also implicitly inform the degree of autonomy an institution enjoys in the face of cumbersome state regulatory excuses especially in its pursuit of social endeavours. With respect to the issue of administrative integrity, this study has revealed that nearly all of the private higher education institutions have not yet put formal mechanisms to tap the voices of their student population. It has also been frequently observed that this aspect of social responsibility is not respected by some of our Private Higher Education Institutions especially in the area of admitting students who have not attained the required grade level and graduating students who have not scored the required Grade Point Average. In fact, despite the difficulty of measuring it, one of the criteria of accreditation suggested by the World Bank stipulates that "the (higher education) institution has an open, fair, and ethical admission".

Institutional autonomy of our PHEIs is, on the other hand, an area of considerable concern. Eleni (2003) in her recent study even argues that the provisions of the Higher Education Proclamation themselves jeopardize the institutional autonomy of PHEIs and leave room for misinterpretation. With a special reference to social responsibilities, unlike many highly democratic societies where higher education institutions enjoy an enviable liberty to exercise their autonomy, the pursuit of civic virtues can, in the Ethiopian context, be stretched only to a certain limit or else they may compromise the primary vocation of the pursuit of knowledge production; and it might, in the worst of cases, bring the institutions on a collision course with a rather suspicious government machinery, hence entail terminal consequences; this can be partly attributed to the nebulous ambiance that surrounds the private-government rapport that has always brutally frustrated the progressive but fearful steps that had been attempted by the private education system.

In terms of the financing component, from the questionnaire administered to few randomly selected private colleges, it was learnt that some 80% of these colleges do not have budget for social endeavours, while 90% of them lack the support unit that can run such non-academic outreach activities. In fact, some administrative and academic staff said that they do not see any market justification for allocating budget for social endeavours, while some said that though they agree in principle with the need to put aside some percentage of the administrative budget for socially beneficial activities, they expressed their doubt as to its feasibility.

The fourth aspect, *viz* “International Cooperation/competition” stands as the practical arena for competitive excellence to show solidarity with institutions more or less privileged but equally important in the development of a common global civilization. This gauge of social responsibility brings to the fore the issue of globalisation and the concomitant daunting challenges of higher education institutions in keeping a judicious balance in their academic and non-academic responses to local and international changes.

Globalisation as a contagious world phenomenon that is reshaping the higher education landscape across nations via the greater access to knowledge beyond a nation’s frontiers through the medium of overseas higher education institutions will both accelerate social change and eradicate inequalities. Such a linkage would not only boost the legitimacy and prestige of a not-so-developed institution found in a developing country, but it would also increase the likelihood of post-graduate studies abroad both for its students and staff members (Hopper 1998). Owing to the raging surge of this phenomenon that engendered the inescapable universal interconnectedness among higher education systems as well as among employment markets, higher academic institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to persevere as servers of a menu of knowledge with a universal savour. Employment imperatives of today’s globalized world seem to cater only to the individual who happens to know all possessing a scholastic résumé that sounds like a recipe for divinity. There are so many changes more than what we can absorb in today’s world. Our higher education system has in many respects become an anachronism in a scholarly global village littered with soul-searching curricular innovations and incredible research breakthroughs. The situation seems to have posed a threat to the very survival of our Higher Education Institutions in the social *Darwinistic* sense of the term.

Some of the private colleges surveyed seem to have fully recognized this threat and were found to have made important steps in the direction of forming strategic linkages in such highly technical areas like curriculum design with overseas colleges. Moreover, the proliferation of private colleges and institutes that offer Computer Technology Programs is by itself an indication of the responses that we are making, *will-nilly*, to the irresistible magnetic influence of globalization, one of the vehicles of which is information technology. Once the challenges and opportunities presented by globalization on higher education systems are sufficiently appreciated, then another equally important and delicate task would follow: to uphold a sensible balance between the pressure for change which comes from the process of technical development through globalization and the tensions created within civic society as a result of the impact of economic and technological change upon the social fabric. “But such a task,” UNESCO (2003:12), argues "is no less delicate for the fact that it comes over and above such well-recognized obligations as acting as a vehicle of

understanding between cultures and communities and for rectifying, where possible, the social imbalances which result from poverty, exclusion and conflict.” In other words, these institutions, although they are moulded by a global university culture, ought to constantly reflect on and organize themselves in tune to their immediate local context, instead of totally shedding their national identity.

An additional variable to the ones suggested by UNESCO discussed above and which has been treated by this survey deals with the role higher education institutions play in *massifying* higher education services as public goods through the vehicle of distance education, which has become a term that encapsulates a gamut of teaching models like IT Learning, computer-assisted instruction, e-learning, televised teaching, self-learning and other innovative learning mechanisms. In a mass system, the diversity of the number of institutions, staff, students and learning programs undermines the authority (trust) of the elite system. The concept of a “gold standard” of quality would then fail to apply to the wide range of class, age, ethnic and race backgrounds that were left out of the higher education equation sifted through an examination system like ours reputed for its “poor predictive validity” (Tirusew 1998:19-35). In other words, the pursuit of this aspect of social responsibility is intimately linked to the quest for social justice as it would help bridge prevalent gaps of social and economic inequalities. Distance learning, besides its flexibility and cost-effectiveness, has the robust social dimension of its being women friendly, hence allowing women get a facile access to higher education services in a manner unmatched by the conventional models (Guri-Rosenblit 1999). However, putting such a pedagogic model in place, especially by a private college, might not at all be a painless task. In spite of the low recurrent costs that would be required to run a distance higher education system, which are in large part covered by student fees, the system has a front loaded investment profile in that it requires a substantial initial capital outlay to design curriculum, train staff, develop and test learning materials and acquire selected technology (Saint 2000). In addition, tertiary distance education programs generally require stronger management skills than traditional programs. “With scattered students, dispersed part-time tutors, far-flung logistics, unreliable communication services, time sensitive production and distribution of learning materials, and detailed student records, successful distance education programs require above average skills in organization, logistics, and problem-solving” (World Bank 2003: 60). Partly for these reasons, Ethiopia ranked last in a recent survey of distance education capacities in 22 African countries (Saint 2000). Again, the progress the country’s private higher education institutions are making along this line is encouraging. As a notable instance, in a recent report, it has been disclosed that one private higher education provider alone has enrolled



33,000 students nationwide supported by four regional offices. The same institution has reportedly graduated 4,300 diploma students in Accounting, Management, and Mechanics.

The second aspect of social responsibility as a university virtue is the engagement of higher education institutions in pursuing social, cultural, economic and at times political agendas that are directly beneficial to the general public. In this regard, from the questionnaire administered, it was learnt that some colleges spearhead environmental protection activities, while others play a leading role in promoting gender equality and in building the capacity of the public sector and the community. It was also found out that almost all colleges surveyed play a participatory and at times a leading role in sports activities, and still few others said that they get involved in health related interventions and in fostering social justice, whatever the latter may mean. Interestingly enough, one of the selected colleges was found to have been involved in enterprise and entrepreneurship development. Overall, given their resource limitations and lack of an enabling environment, this is by no means a discouraging achievement. After all, universities, especially the private-owned ones, cannot simply meet whatever is demanded by a society like ours, with a myriad of its problems, places upon them. It may even be ethically erroneous to assume that the university should be reduced to a “service agency”, accepting without question and without independent judgment, every trifles of short term “service-oriented” pressures exerted by the “market”. Herein lies the ethical tension/the moral challenge engendered by the irrevocable fact that Private Higher Education Institutions are private-owned and hence have profit generation as one of their leading agendas. Therefore, it is absurd, in both economic and academic terms, to expect them to operate like charity organizations. Neither should they be plagued by steep profit motivations and by what Levy (2002) called the hyper commercialism syndrome. Both extremes are not so judicious options and may even be suicidal choices.

Another important observation so far made with regard to the pursuit of social responsibility by private colleges in the country, which is perhaps the case else where, is the personal influence of university leaders and presidents, both through their “charisma and cash”. Some writers even argue that the pursuit of social responsibility in a higher education context can be fully realized through the personal influences of university leaders and influential academics, instead of through the university as a corporate entity with a miscellany of interests and influences. This has somehow successfully been seen in some of the strongest private higher education institutions in the country. This argument is drawn on the assertion that the personal whims and fancies of university “owners” and presidents play a decisive part in upholding or downplaying this virtue as epitomized in the maxim, “ He who pays the piper calls the tune.”

In all the above discussed scenarios, what is expected of higher education institutions is to be socially responsible in all facets of their enterprises and give due respect to societies' concerns and at times take the risk of seeing ways of anticipating and taking the initiative in meeting some of society's pressing demands. The term pressing needs to be underscored, because it is a relative term and because it forms the heart of the virtue of social responsibility. Professor Brenda Gourly (cited in UNESCO 2003: 20) argues that, "if universities, wherever they may be, with whatever resources (human and physical) do not seek solutions to the pressing human conditions of the society in which they are embedded, then this could only be regarded as an ethical failure or an intellectual failure, or both." The challenging nature of societies' problems and their sheer volume almost always call for alliances to be forged in which universities play the role of a lead facilitator or a broker. This alliance may bring in the government, the community, industries, NGOs, etc. Is such an alliance in place in Ethiopia today? Certainly not! We have a country where there is a nascent civil society. To what extent are NGOs sponsoring private higher education institutions in pursuing civic responsibilities? What attempts has the government made to support these institutions in these endeavours? Has the government established an atmosphere of trust which is the least that is required of such an alliance? Is the public not still unsure of the credibility of private higher education institutions as it is sometimes misinformed by rumours and speculative surmises? But the crucial question of all remains: are private higher education institutions themselves sufficiently aware of the role expected of them especially in pursuing social, cultural and even political activities? To begin with, there is a widespread lack of awareness on the very need to pursue such activities as a fundamental university principle. Most students and some academic and administrative staff with whom discussions were held said that such activities are exclusively the responsibilities of the government. This same group argued that an excessive engagement with resource commitments in such endeavours would not only be considered as a double taxation on the private provider, but also as a luxurious vocation that may compromise the pursuit of a host of academic imperatives. In other words, they conjecture that excessive pursuit of this dimension of social responsibility might eliminate the pursuit of the other equally important dimension which surrounds quality and pertinence, which is otherwise more closely linked to the process of accreditation and to the very survival of the institution. Almost all academic and administrative staff emphatically added that they harbour the apprehension that their socio-economic engagements might be mistaken by the government as a guise for furthering ulterior political interests. And, they unanimously call upon the government, first of all, to take courageous steps towards considering the private higher education system as a trustworthy development partner instead of an adversary.

Finally, in the midst of the host of daunting civic responsibilities laid upon the modern-day university, there is much to be expected from society itself for a fruitful engagement therein. A strong coalition has to be created among a country's higher education system and the society. The latter should, implicitly or explicitly, reach a sort of *social contract* on the basis of the *volonté generale* (general will) à la Rousseau with its universities via its associations, which would automatically entail a very critical ingredient of social responsibility, i.e. the notion of mutual accountability. But it does not sound so original to argue that Ethiopia has not yet gave birth to a vibrant civil society that can really provide the necessary trust to this coalition. The bitter reality is that robust university-community bondage may not at all be tolerable with some regimes reputed for their classic disengagement from their public and which, out of sheer frustration, forge counterfeit civil society organizations in their own likeness to undo the authentic bondage already created. Are there not lingering memories of such kinds of scenarios in our context?

On the contrary, however, a regime that is seamlessly close to its public would provide the badly needed leverage of facilitation in reaching and executing this social contract. This line of argument takes us to the role the government has to play in the effort private higher education institutions are making in pursuing social responsibility. In stead of discussing what the government should do, however, it would be more feasible to discuss what it should not do given the complex political situation we are in. The minimum the government should not do is to unnecessarily and unscrupulously interfere in the operations of these institutions and curtail their full academic freedom and autonomy in exercising their responsibilities in the name of licensure and accreditation. It should not consider the private higher education system as “a marginal academic appendix” to the public sector and as a vestigial organ within the country's complex socio-economic configuration (Wondwosen 2003: 24). Even the World Bank whom Damtew (*Loc.cit.*) christened as Ethiopia's “unwitting relative” recommends that expansion of private tertiary institutions be more actively encouraged in order to make the burden of higher education expansion borne by Government more bearable. The Bank also envisions a near term goal of doubling the share of private enrolments from the current 21 % to 40 % by 2010. More importantly, to help achieve this goal, the Bank in the most cheering of words suggests that the Government provide stronger incentives for the expansion of private tertiary education (e.g., access to land, more generous customs exemptions for the importation of educational materials), and also extend quality-enhancing support to private institutions identified as needing improvement (e.g., participation in the National Pedagogical Resources Center, leadership and management training, creation of a fund for remedial actions) (World Bank 2003).

Yet, as a final remark, it needs to be born in mind that the government has every right to hold accountable and tug and pull the private institution into ethical poise as far as the latter fails to feel *socially responsible* for the collective obligation of quality, fairness, tolerance, and for the upkeep of academic, administrative and moral standards.

### **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Based on the critical interpretations of the findings of this modest study, the following conclusions and recommendations are made towards a more forward-looking and committed engagement of private higher education institutions in the pursuit of their social responsibilities.

There is a prevalent mistrust between government and the private education sector; the government has not yet developed the badly needed trust for constructive engagement with the private higher education system. The government still mistakes the civic engagement of private higher education institutions as a guise for political subversion and a threat to its legitimacy and an unwarranted encroachment into its turf; this ambiance of mistrust has to be dispelled for the sake of national development. A collaborative interface needs to be created among government-owned and private-owned higher education institutions in the pursuit of social responsibilities; this would have the added advantage of dissipating any speculative reciprocal illusions and the accompanying mutual mistrust. Conducting periodic meetings between higher education institutions, the Ministry of Education and other relevant stakeholders would solidify the hitherto shaky private-government-society collaborative interface. In a related tone, the newly established “Ethiopian Private Colleges Forum” needs to play an increased role in promoting and facilitating civic engagements by private higher education institutions and in galvanizing the desired society-university synergy.

- ◆ There is a reasonable degree of awareness among private higher education institutions on the need for pursuing social responsibility as a university principle and some practical steps have already been taken in that direction. Some, though very few, of the surveyed institutions put aside some percentage of their budget for promoting social endeavours. However, their responses so far to fast-evolving macro and micro-level changes within the country and at the international level, be it through curricular revisits or research engagements, can only be characterized as rudimentary and insufficient. Therefore, it is suggested that Private Higher Education Institutions be more vigilant of changing macro and micro-level changes within the country and at the international level and give appropriate responses and even go long distances to the extent of ensuring the employability of their prospective graduates.

- ◆ The absence of a vibrant and genuinely representative civil society and an embracing donor community that sponsors social endeavours that are initiated by private colleges in the country overshadows the full realization of the virtue of social responsibility now and seems likely to continue into the near future. Therefore, national and international donors and employing firms need to become increasingly involved in sponsoring socially beneficial endeavours that are initiated by private higher education institutions.
- ◆ Limited attempts were made so far by private higher education institutions to *massify* higher education services through the introduction of pedagogic models like Distance Education; the badly needed government incentive to put such otherwise costly systems in place such as loan financing for covering the huge upfront costs, tax exemptions for the importation of educational supplies and tax holidays have all failed to realize. The government should play a more aggressive role in supporting private higher education institutions in their attempts to *massify* higher education services especially via distance education and IT models; possible areas of government intervention may include, *inter alia*, allowing these institutions a privileged access to local capital markets and extending the existing tax holiday to a reasonable number of years and providing them with a duty free status for the importation of educational supplies and equipment. The government should also strive hard to remove all bureaucratic and administrative disincentives that have consistently been strangling the expansion drive of private higher education institutions. As a further constructive gesture, the government needs to consider the possibility of rewarding those private higher education institutions that would exert exemplary efforts to live up to their moral and historical responsibility to society.
- ◆ Private Higher Education Institutions have failed to fully appreciate the social costs of such post-graduate scenarios like unemployment, underemployment or misemployment on account of their failure to discern the way labour market trends move and act accordingly through program and curricular revisits or other interventions. Some of them have, however, shown aggressive commitments to ensuring the future salability of their prospective graduates via arranging apprenticeships and work practice sessions. They ought to pay greater attention to this aspect of social responsibility.
- ◆ Although Private Higher Education Institutions have begun to appreciate the threats posed and the possibilities opened up by globalisation, they still lack the macroscopic vision on how to strategically transact and deal with them. Their attempts to forge strategic academic linkages with overseas universities were not also sufficiently dynamic and persistent.
- ◆ There is scanty documented data so far on the role of Private Higher Education Institutions in the pursuit of social responsibility as a university principle; it is suggested that this

university mission be studied in greater depth and be well documented in the future in both private-owned and government-owned higher education institutions.

- ◆ The accreditation and quality assurance process tends to be excessively control-oriented towards Private Higher Education Institutions and does not consider these institutions on an equal footing with their government counterparts. Therefore, the first positive step in that direction, is to allow private colleges to be involved in regulation self regulation in the process of accreditation; and this would have the advantage of creating a sense of ownership and accountability on the part of private providers to the rules and regulations applied therein.

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