Private Higher Education in Ethiopia: Peril and Promise

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Abstract: *As globalization gets its foothold in Africa, the people have started to feel its effects they are grapping with the new challenges coming along with it. The impacts are also gradually beginning to be felt as globalization begins to engulf the higher education sector. Willingly or otherwise, Africa seems to have come to terms with the fact that the hegemony of public higher education establishments would be a history as soon as the continent's private institutions emerge as a potent alternative. Like its counterparts in Africa, Ethiopia has not only acknowledged, but also actively responded to the changing situation as evidenced by the new reforms and policies introduced to higher education system. Informed by the new world order, Ethiopia has recently adopted a liberal policy stance that encouraged local private investment as well as foreign players though the country is not yet a party to the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS). The general Agreement on Trade and Services obliges member countries to open up their domestic markets to foreign institutions and companies engaged in commercialization of higher education. This short paper shades light on the status of private HE in Ethiopia in view of its promises, pitfalls, and potentials in strengthening the higher education system.*

Introduction

Ethiopia's higher education of the Western variant is very young. It is only a little more than half a century old. And until recently, private institutions were not taken as an integral part of the system. Over the last seven years, however, the developments in the private sector exposed the failure of the former public higher education protectionist stance since the former are

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functioning fairly well enrolling about a quarter of the country's overall tertiary students. To say the least, the present scenario portrays a marked growth of the sector considering the humble beginning of pioneer private HEIs, such as the Saint Mary's (SMUC) and Unity (UUC) University Colleges both of which were nothing more than language schools about a decade ago. Apart from the share of homegrown private institutions, opportunities for higher education widened following the increase in and diversity of foreign providers originating mainly from Africa, Asia and Europe. In this connection, the Open University of UK, the University of South Africa (UNISA), and the Indhera Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), are examples of foreign institutions based in African, Asian, and European continents. What is more, the pressure of globalization along with the instrumental role of the ICT revolution resulted in virtual universities such as the World Bank-sponsored African Virtual University (AVU) housed in the premises of Faculty of Science, Addis Ababa University. These, among others, represent the unfolding challenges vis-à-vis the survival of the national higher education system be it private or public if they fail to strive for meaningful role in the rapidly changing global higher education environment. The reason is apparent. Even though most foreign higher education providers began their activities in collaboration with local institutions, their cooperation would be no longer necessary once these providers establish themselves and win the confidence of their clientele. In the face of an ever increasing pressure from globalization and cross boarder distance education it is indispensable that Ethiopian private HEIs work very hard to ensure their survival by at least living up to their promises. The particular emphasis on private institutions is due to the increasing crisis within itself related to the declining accountability on the one hand, and the pressure from external forces on the other.

In view of the above discussions, this article intends to serve a dual purpose. The first is to provoke a professional discourse on the current problems and future prospects of private higher education in Ethiopia. The second purpose is to encourage all concerned to salvage private higher education sector and help it remain useful and sustainable.

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Beginning from the mid 1990s the education sector in general and the higher education system in particular has been undergoing significant changes. In the late 1990s, the higher education sub-sector was opened to the private sector. This was an example of an enabling climate that had been created following changes in policies[1]. Until 2007, the number of private institutions located in Addis Ababa and other major cities reached over 100. At this juncture, it should be admitted that the growth of private institutions opened up new avenues for many citizens particularly for the marginalized social groups like women. For instance, if we look at the 2006 overall share of private tertiary institutions in female enrolment, the statistics was about 32% with some institutions enrolling about 50% females[2]. But still, the concentration of higher education institutions in the main cities did not seem to offer equal opportunities particularly to citizens residing in geographically removed areas and regions. Students in remote localities are less likely to have equally qualified lecturers, adequate infrastructure, and learning resources. In any case, the advent of private higher education can be viewed as an example of a step taken towards playing a key role for the national human capital accumulation.

A closer observation of the nature of the existing private HEIs (excluding faith based ones) reminds one to trace a pattern of two constellations of founders harboring entirely unrelated intent behind them. The first category of founders is generally composed of "responsible citizens" drawn from diverse sectors including people from the private business, civil service, diaspora professionals, and academics who are genuinely interested to contribute to the society while at the same time benefiting from their constructive engagement. The majority of private HEIs founded and led by such individuals have been generally successful withstanding the apparent threats coming from public HEIs as well as from cross- boarder private providers or virtual universities. It can also be argued that this group has been making significant contributions to the development of the sub sector

with a level of concern for quality and scholarship within the limitations of material and financial resources.

The second category seems to have included those who viewed the sector like any other business meant to generate a huge profit with little regard to ethical issues of higher education. Thus, they behaved less responsibly. In contrast to their disregard to their reciprocal obligations that include accountability to the fee-paying public, honesty and ethical conduct of their activities, these institutions are observed to attach undue importance to media advertisement, extravagant graduation ceremonies [often organized in very expensive five-star hotels], and generally engagement in disinformation and deliberate distortion of their "real self" when they portray themselves in public. What appear to count most for them is doing everything in their power to influence the impression of the public and their fee paying customers without actually having the traits and qualities they claimed to possess. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of these institutions have very few or no full time academic staff. They have a track record of violation of academic freedom, and lack of respect for the terms and conditions of service of teaching staff. A recent study has shown that, even in established private HEIs there has been a complete neglect for due process regarding staff disciplinary matters, faculty recruitment and dismissals[3]. In connection with their location, for the most part, they are placed next to noisy bars, pubs or busy boutiques in the city centers, not to mention the serious shortfall in infrastructure, laboratories, library collections and space. Most of these institutions do not satisfy the basic requirements to be centers of knowledge.

In the year 2007, the Ministry of Education (MoE) announced that it would not employ the graduates of private HEIs in government schools. The sanction apparently did not differentiate between those which toil to be ethical and accountable from those which allegedly failed to meet minimum standards. In any case, one thing came out clear. The quality of graduates from private HEIs clearly became a serious concern for the government, as it is the major stakeholder. On the other hand, it is in public record that many private institutions have less impressive records of accountability, ethics and

professionalism. Regrettably, the action of those driven exclusively by love for money has indeed shattered the hopes of the private sector to remain significant in strengthening Ethiopia's position regionally as well as globally.

The Fear and Dilemmas

The mounting fear and suspicion among the public vis-à-vis private HEIs basically emanates from two key concerns. First, the feeling among the public and professionals that domestic private HEIs are less credible and hence, their credentials are a suspect. Second, the skepticism has been informed by the inability of the existing systems oversight or quality assurance body's to reliably update the public about the quality and credibility of courses, programs, and credentials awarded by private institutions. The fear and suspicion is not without reasons. To the dismay of many observers, for instance, some of the alleged "diploma mills" which originally established themselves as "teachers' colleges" automatically turned themselves into private kindergartens, primary or secondary schools. Here, the issue is not why they made up their minds overnight; the question is: How come an institution which built itself over the years failed to experience a natural shock of its demise and respond with a knee jerk reaction in an attempt to restore its statuesque? The answer is clear. These institutions neither care about nor envisage remaining viable and accountable. As an entity driven by profit motive *per se,* they seem to hold the view: *"If we are not allowed to make money playing these games…let us try other games until they become illegal".* As I noted earlier, the pervading fear among the general public emanates from the abusive practices of some private institutions, which appears to shift to even more sensitive area like the training of health professionals. The soaring demand for nurses, laboratory technicians, pharmacists etc… is less likely to care about the extent of the credibility of the institution that gives the training. The consequences of ill-training in this respect are crystal clear-their patients may pay the price with a lasting handicap if they are lucky enough while this might cost the unlikely ones their lives.

The qualitatively different patterns of behavior of the two categories of private HEIs seem to have left the Ethiopian government in a dilemma: Should all private HEIs, including those that have been making a concerted effort to make a difference, be banned from training teachers and other professionals in a country whose human development index (HDI) is the lowest by the standards of sub-Saharan Africa? Or should it run the risk of facing the far reaching negative consequences by allowing private HEIs to train teachers in the absence of robust and experienced system to filter the bad from the good? Understandably, the fear in this specific area of training is its exponential spread–badly trained teachers breed less prepared and incapacitated generation of young people who will not be able to compete in the increasingly, globalized, and internationalized labor market. Nor can the products (i.e. graduates) of these institutions be expected to have the necessary preparation to address poverty that the country is anxious to get out of.

Concluding Remarks

Notwithstanding the global surge of private higher education and favorable domestic policy environment there has been a shrinking role of private institutions as significant players in Ethiopian higher education system. In view of the evidence presented earlier, the problem is largely of their own making, though one cannot rule out the role of exogenous factors including the impact of globalization. Thus, it is important at this point to be concerned about the fate of homegrown private HEIs in view of the hopes they rekindled, and the fears and dilemmas they represented to the Ethiopian higher education landscape.

In order for the higher education system to live up to its promises of playing a vanguard role in Ethiopia's struggle against poverty, it is increasingly critical not only to put in place, but also to strengthen quality assurance and monitoring bodies at all levels. National, provincial and district level branches of these establishments are fundamental to stop the premature demise of genuine and accountable institutions. It is indispensable that the hopes

should not be shattered by abusive practices of handfuls of private institutions. The capacity, competence and scope of the higher education relevance and quality agency (HERQA) and the higher education strategy center (HESC) have to be significantly boosted. HESC must engage in relevant policy research regarding quality and relevance of the higher education in general and private higher education in particular to inform decision makers. In addition, regional education departments and HERQA must work hand-in-hand to avert the threats and potential abuse. The implication of these is far reaching as it decidedly affects Ethiopia's position not only in the higher education but also in social and economic development.

Notes

1. The full text of the education policy and higher education proclamation can be obtained from: TGE (Transitional Government of Ethiopia). Education and Training Policy. Education Media Production and Distribution Agency (EMPDA), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia (FDRGE). (2003). Higher Education Proclamation (No.351/2003). Negarit Gazetta, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

2. The detailed discussion on gender equity in higher education is presented in: Semela, T. 2007. Identification of Factors Contributing to Gender Disparity in an Ethiopian University. *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review*. Vol. 23. No.2 (June), 73-91.

3. For the detailed account on governance and academic freedom in private higher education institutions see: Semela, T. 2007. The Status of Governance, Academic Freedom, and Higher Education Teaching Personnel: A Synthesis of Institutional Case Studies. *FSS Research Report No. 2*. Forum for Social Studies (FSS), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.