Internationalization Experiences of Ethiopian Higher Education in the Pandemic Era. *Yekunoamlak Alemu*

Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are undergoing institutional reforms including curriculum revisions, university-industry linkages, twinning programs, joint research, etc. in an attempt to cope with fast-changing global and local situations. The three missions of HEIs incorporate teaching learning, research, and community service. Some HEIs are in the ivory tower detached from real-life situations and far from addressing existing and emerging problems of society. This shows that the third wing of HEIs, i.e., community service has been given less attention. In Ethiopia, there are expansions at all educational levels. However, the education system needs to travel a long distance in order to improve the quality. Inequality of education is observed between urban–rural (nomadic areas) and boys – girls. The pandemic also posed limitations on face-to-face learning. Moreover, HEIs focus on knowledge with inadequate consideration for value and skill development. By way of addressing these issues, the paper aims at exploring practices, gaps, and emerging trends in the internationalization of Ethiopian higher education. In order to achieve these objectives, different methods including desk review, theoretical sketch, and reflections from practice coupled with institutional examples were employed. Based on the above desk review, research results, and institutional examples, internationalization of higher education in Ethiopia can be labeled at the infant stage with heavy reliance on Western approaches and considered weak in resources and networks. In order to counter this, HEIs in Ethiopia need to make use of the current virtual and blended learning environment so as to initiate flexible platforms without neglecting indigenous and lifelong practices. Hence, parallel to promoting the internationalization of higher education, the de-internationalization HEIs also has to be exercised so as to scale up homegrown strategies.

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Introduction

Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) encompass tertiary-level education, higher technical/vocational studies, and applied universities. In this 21st-century of knowledge economy, HEIs are undergoing institutional reforms including structural adjustments and curriculum revisions to cope with rapidly changing and sometimes turbulent circumstances. Because of institutional dynamics and environmental uncertainties such as the recent pandemic, HEIs need to be prepared to devise alternative strategies, coping mechanisms, and interdisciplinary and thematic approaches to address emerging challenges. Although standardization and harmonization of curriculum promote mobility and credit transfer, a one-size-fits-all approach may not suit the actual situations of all higher education (HE) structures.

Internationalization is perceived to be a complex and multifaceted concept involving both national and transnational contexts. One aspect deals with activities including intercultural education; academic mobility or exchange schemes for students and faculty members; and

research partnership projects. The other dimension of internationalization refers to market-oriented cross-border education in host countries of the North and branch campuses or franchises through face-to-face and virtual modes of delivery. The concept is also closely related to globalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Brandenburg & De Wit, 2011; Qiang, 2003).

According to Altbach (2006), globalization and internationalization in higher education seems to be complementary and even sometimes used interchangeably but found to be distinct phenomena. In line with this, Altbach defined, globalization as,

> "the broad economic, technological, and scientific trends that directly affect higher education and are largely inevitable in the contemporary world," where internationalization "refers to specific policies and programs undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to support student or faculty exchanges, encourage collaborative research overseas, set up joint teaching programs in other countries or a myriad of initiatives" (Altbatch, 2006:123).

On the other hand, in terms of both practice and perceptions, Van Vught *et al.* (2002) indicated that:

> "internationalization is closer to the well-established tradition of international cooperation and mobility and the core values of quality and excellence, whereas globalization refers more to competition, pushing the concept of higher education as a tradable commodity and challenging the concept of higher education as a public good" (Van Vught et al., 2002: 17).

Although there is confusion and misconceptions between these two terms, most writers agree on interdependence and relative differences between the concepts.

One of the widely used working definitions of internationalization of higher education by Knight (2003) refers to the function and process frameworks as, "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2003: 2).

In this definition, function denotes the three functions of HEIs, i.e., teaching, research, and services, whereas process

indicates the continuing and progressive feature of the concept.

The Rationale for the Internationalization of HEIs

According to Knight (2004) and de Wit (2000), the rationale in the context of internationalization highlights the reasons or motivations for integrating an international perspective into higher education. HEIs are working hard towards branding and international reputations to excel in their service and stay competitive. In connection to this, Knight (2004) identified the following four groups of rationales**:** academic, social/cultural, political, and economic.

Table 1: Rationales Driving Internationalization

Rationales	Existing—National and Institutional Levels Combined
Social/cultural	National cultural identity
	Intercultural understanding
	Citizenship development
	Social and community development
Political	Foreign policy

	National security
	Technical assistance
	Peace and mutual understanding
	National identity
	Regional identity
Economic	Economic growth and competitiveness
	Labor market
	Financial incentives
Academic and teaching	International dimension to research
	Extension of academic horizon
	Institution building
	Profile and status
	Enhancement of quality
	International academic standards

Source: Knight (2004)

The concept of the rationale for internationalization is associated with approaches that are categorized into institutional, national, and international levels. Priorities given by developed and developing countries for the four

groups of the rationale for internationalization may be examined based on their actual need and development objectives. For instance, according to the study by Tamirat (2015), due to capacity development needs at existing drastic expansion in the Ethiopian HEIs, the dominant rationale in HEIs situation of the country was found to be academic as compared to economic, political, and/or cultural rationales.

On top of these generic rationales for the internationalization of higher education, IAU (2003:8) has identified the following major reasons for internationalizing HEIs based on the manifestations and detailed activities they exhibit:

- Mobility and exchanges for students and teachers,
- Teaching and research collaboration,
- academic standards and quality,
- research projects,
- Cooperation and development assistance,
- Curriculum development,
- International and intercultural understanding,
- Promotion and profile of the institution,
- diversifying source of faculty and students,
- Regional issues and integration,
- international student recruitment, and
- diversifying income generation.

Objectives of the Study

Higher education institutions have been the leading center in teaching-learning, research, and community services. In light of this background, the paper tries to examine the internationalization experience of Ethiopian HEIs from the perspective of current practices, challenges encountered, prospects, and Covid-19 situations. Hence, this study seeks to:

(1) explore existing practices, gaps, and emerging trends in the internationalization of Ethiopian higher education from a global perspective.

(2) contribute to the improvement of the internationalization of higher education in Ethiopia by making use of the current digital learning platform.

Research Methods

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, different approaches including desk review, theoretical and historical sketch coupled with country examples and experience of

HEIS were employed. These approaches were complemented with secondary sources including documents and previous studies on higher education internationalization.

Accordingly, the research method was qualitative with some mix of quantitative statistical information from documents and agencies responsible for the internationalization of higher education. To complement this, the researcher used secondary sources including documents and previous studies on the internationalization of HEIs.

Global Trends of Internationalization of HEIs

This section deals with internationalization from the perspectives of historical context; national and global settings; the evolving contrasting trends; recent new developments in regionalization, the English language, science, technology, and research.

Historical Development of Internationalization of HEIs

Universities of medieval times (between the 11th and 15th centuries) were established for the study of the arts and

the higher disciplines of theology, law, and medicine. They were found to be ivory towers alienated from the community's way of life.

The European higher education practices during the post-Second World War (1950 – 1970) were not strictly international. The focus at that time was on rebuilding their countries after the great depression and arranging mobility schemes for degree-seeking students from developing countries, most of which were former colonies (de Wit, 2011).

Based on the works of Knight (2004), internationalization has been conceptualized for centuries in political science and governmental relations but it came to the educational settings in the early 80s at the institutional level and terms of a set of activities including exchange programs and cooperation. Towards the end of the 80s internationalization shifted from a simple exchange of students' mobility to business approaches, and from activities that affect a selected few groups to a mass phenomenon (Brandenburg and De Wit, 2011). Subsequently, by the mid-1990s a process or organizational approach was developed

by Knight (1994) to show that internationalization was an integrated and sustainable process at the institutional level.

In this 21st century, learning became more international and deviated from the previous fragmented activity-oriented approach that was limited at institutional levels. Hence, the new focus is on holistic and multidimensional global learning.

Current Practices of Internationalization of HEIs

As opposed to ivory tower medieval universities, Kerr (1994) advocated universalism of learning where learning becomes international with a stronger emphasis on international cooperation, exchange, research, and development.

It is also of great importance to consider five contrasting trends which determine the functioning of HEIs in national and international contexts. These contrasting trends that shape the mission and strategies of HEIs include serving national priorities versus operating within an international setting; government steering versus institutional autonomy; increased diversity versus harmonization policies; competition versus

collaboration; and intellectual property versus intellectual philanthropy (Guri-Rosenblit, 2015).

 These days, the changing landscape of higher education is getting attention and becoming more complex. Triggering forces include the growth of ICT services, increased international labor mobility, focus on market economy and trade liberalization, emphasis on knowledge society, increased levels of private investment, and decreased public support for education, and lifelong learning (Knight, 2004). De Wit (2011) also stressed the new roles of students and staff members that prepare them for life and work in a global community transcending the national borders and embracing the concepts of sustainability, equity of rights and access, and advancement of education and research.

According to de Wit (2011), the double roles or two dimensions of internationalization center on cooperation and competition as stipulated in the Bologna Declaration of 1999 and the Lisbon Strategy of 2000. These two dimensions spearhead cooperation resulting in a European area for higher education (EAHE) with solid support for such cooperation is

required to cope with the competition from the United States, Japan, and, increasingly, China and other emerging economies.

The Bologna process in Europe, with all its inconsistencies and inappropriateness, targeted at Europeanization or regionalization of the higher education system, contributed to the development of degree structure, qualification framework, credit transfer (such as ECTS), and curriculum harmonization activities.

Results and Discussion from Current Practices and Review of Experiences

Ethiopian Experience of Higher Education Internationalization Amid the Pandemic

This third section deals with the internationalization practices of Ethiopian HEIs supported by some evidence from the institutes.

In Ethiopia, there are around 50 public universities, of which most of them (47) operate under government ownership. In

2020, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE) by its Higher Education Strategic Center (HESC) classified public universities into four centers of excellence research (8), applied science (15), compressive/general (21) as well as specialized (3) institutions. According to MoSHE, these classifications aimed at enhancing quality based on the review of experiences of at least 11 countries.

Recently, the Ministry of Education (MoE) restructured to embrace general education and higher education. There existed a favorable policy environment towards the internalization of HEIs amid the pandemic threat at MoE. Specialized support units such as HESC and Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance (HERQA) – renamed Education and Training Authority (ETA) were supporting the internalization efforts. The fifth Education Sector Development Program (ESDP V, 2015) also incorporated policy elements related to internationalization. Besides, the recent higher education proclamation (2019) and higher education policy and strategy (2020) provided policy provisions for higher education internationalization in Ethiopia.

Although there are some unrelated attempts and policy measures to internationalize HEIs, the practice and its development are still at an infant stage.

In line with this, a study by Tamrat (2015) that comprises nine samples from public HEIs and six samples from private HEIs has the following to say:

> Currently, institutional policies and strategies at the sample HEIs do not seem to have been directed at internationalization as such. Most often, they fall under what institutions call 'partnership schemes' which are usually stated in the missions, strategic plans, and directions of the sample institutions studied. (Tamrat, 2015: 12)

According to Tamrat (2020), the foundation for internalization in Ethiopia can be traced to the times of missionaries before the establishment of a modern school in 1908, where the missionaries were instrumental in opening schools and offering scholarships for talented students. During the 1950s, international students from Tanganyika, Kenya, Greece, India, the UK, the former Yugoslavia, and the USA were enrolled at Addis Ababa University (AAU).

Rudimentary data at that time indicated that these international students accounted for 13 % of the student population at AAU (Ayalew, 2017).

After the earlier attempt to internationalize, the gradual growth of HEIs in this country demonstrated different features of internationalization such as employment of international staff, adoption of English as the medium of instruction, use of foreign educational materials, the pursuit of international research and partnership projects with HEIs abroad (Tamrat, 2020).

As shown in Table 3, the research work of Tamrat (2015) revealed that Addis Ababa University from public HEIs and St. Mary from private HEIs relatively devoted a better share of the budget to support their internationalization efforts. Adequate provision of financial resources contributes towards the improvement of quality in HEIs.

Table 3: Availability of Office and Budget in Sample HEIs

No.	University	Responsible Office
1	AAU	External Relations Office
2	Adama	Office of International Relations
3	Admas	V/P for Business Development
4	Arba Minch	Corporate Communication Directorate
5	Bahir Dar	Vice President for Information & Strategic Communication
6	Gonder	—
7	Haramaya	Office of External Relations
8	Hawassa	Corporate Communication and Marketing
9	International Leadership Institute	Internatinal Office
10	Jimma	Office of External Relations
11	Mekelle	Corporate Communication and Marketing Office
12	SMUC	Office of Outreach Services
13	Sri Sai	—

Source: Wondwossen (2015, p. 27)

Table 4 below, based on Web of Science (2017) analytics indicated the Universities of Gondar, Jimma, Mekelle, and Hawassa take second, third, fourth, and fifth place after Addis Ababa University as the most research-productive universities in the country. Regarding impact, Mekelle University has shown better results than the remaining four HEIs. Be that as it may, although attention is given to research activities in various policy documents including ESDP V (MoE, 2015), research output was found to be low implying that Ethiopian HEIs

are still teaching-oriented (Yallew, 2020; Van Deuren et al., 2016; Cloete & Maassen, 2015).

Table 4: Normalized citation impact of Ethiopian Universities

Name of institution	research output	Normalized citation impact
AAU	3449	1.23
University of Gondar	994	1.58
Jimma University	833	0.98
Mekelle University	733	2.60
Total	6685	

Source: Yallew 2020, in Web of Science (2017)

According to the US News Global Report (2021), AAU has improved its ranking both globally and in Africa. To this effect, Addis Ababa University stood 1st in Best Universities in East Africa, 10th in Best Universities in Africa, and 553rd in Best Global Universities with a Global Score of 48.8.

Among the HEIs in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa University from the public and St. Mary University from the private sector

were found to be pioneers in the direction of internalization. AAUs involvement in various continental and international consortiums and its active research-based participation in current challenges including Covid-19 and the Renaissance Dam project is exemplary. Mention has also to be made for the strong commitment of St. Mary University to organizing international research, symposiums, and publications that promote internationalization activities.

During the recent pandemic, Ethiopian HEIs were implementing the guidelines and protocols issued by the MoSHE and the Ministry of Health (MoH). Blended teaching and learning approach that combines face-to-face learning with virtual learning is being practiced in these institutions. Some of the HEIs with strong ICT sections, including AAU, Gondar University, Jimma University, St. Mary University, Unity University, and Hope Enterprise University College already started online learning via Google Class, Telegram, and other platforms even in their undergraduate programs. Most of the thesis defense sessions and webinars in-country and abroad for training and workshops are also held virtually through Google Meet and Zoom.

In connection with this, as Bishaw and Melesse (2017) indicated, both public and private HEIs including Bahir Dar University, Mekele University, Jimma University, Addis Ababa University from public institutions and Alpha, St, Marry, Unity, Admas, and Ethopis from private higher institutions were offering distance courses in different program areas at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Virtual learning experienced a greater momentum after Covid-19 in HEIs in Ethiopia. Such an online mode of delivery that does not strictly consider the physical existence of host institutes was a new development that determines the future direction of HEIs (IUA, 2003).

In essence, the trend, development, and prospects of internationalization efforts of Ethiopian higher education were highly affected because of Covid-19 and its influence would continue during the post-pandemic era.

Opportunities and Challenges of Internationalization in HEIs During the Pandemic

This part tries to discuss the internationalization experience of Ethiopian higher education given existing opportunities and challenges.

According to the survey by Tamrat (2015), most of HEIs in Ethiopia have attached high importance to internalization and witnessed the significance of internationalization for promoting teaching and learning activities, student and teacher capacity development, and quality assurance. Conversely, the same author mentioned lack of documentation, lack of cultural identity, brain drain, and increased costs as limitations towards internalization of HEIs.

Furthermore, the teaching and learning process at the Ethiopian HEIs is conceptually overloaded and detached from the community and real-life situations. Based on the study by Bishaw and Melesse (2017),

"The Ethiopian higher education is criticized for giving little attention to the application of different teaching methods

such as debates, discussion among students and between teachers and students, among teachers and it hardly invites experienced members of the society and professionals in different fields of study to deliver a speech on their success stories and accumulated experiences" (Bishaw and Melesse, 2017: 41),

Regarding the challenges and responses to Covid-19 in African higher education including Ethiopia, Tamrat and Teferra (2020) discussed the positive move and tendencies towards online and blended learning that may create access and opportunity for many students but with cost implications of ICT infrastructure and a poor internet connection and power interruptions.

Although the Europeanization of higher education in developing countries such as Ethiopia contributed to the development of qualification framework and credit transfer, it was criticized for making use of borrowed instructional materials and methodologies. Concerns were also raised about the 'loss of cultural identity and 'the overuse of the English language. One exception to such a Europeanization

process is Ethiopia, which has its literal characters and uses local languages as a means of instruction (Teferra & Knight, 2008).

Concerning South – North partnership, Tamrat and Teferra (2018) state what they referred to as 'lopsided partnerships' between Ethiopian universities and their Northern partners:

> "In most cases, local institutions are mere 'recipients,' and the elements of reciprocity are not evident. There have also been instances of Northern partners seeking to achieve their objectives without too much regard to the needs and aspirations of their local partners and, at times, their funders". (p. 19)

 Such institutional relationships, which are established on an unequal basis between Ethiopian and Northern partners created a dependency attitude and limited the participation of Southern collaborators in strategic issues (Jowi 2012).

The internationalization of higher education facilitates opportunities for exchange programs and promotes the employability of university graduates. Conversely,

internationalization can limit indigenous practices to some extent.

Hence, there is a need to de-internationalization, that is, instead of coping concepts and models developed by the North, the South is expected to seek homegrown approaches, which serve as a foundation to internationalize their HEIs (Wan and Geo-Ja Ja, 2013).

In addition to this, Woldegiyorgis (2017) described the Ethiopian higher education internationalization practice in the following way:

> "Though one cannot completely disregard the arguably negative consequences of detaching higher education from local realities, it can also be argued that Ethiopian higher education has opportunities for fairly easy readability and interaction with the rest of the world. This is, among other things, due to its language of instruction and the mobility of students and staff" (Woldegiyorgis, 2017: 113).

Despite the gains from twinning arrangements, cultural exchanges, mobility schemes, and joint research projects, it was

observed that indigenous efforts and local initiatives were not given adequate attention in due course of the academic partnership.

Concluding Remark

Based on the above desk review, research results, and institutional examples, internationalization of higher education in Ethiopia is at the infant stage with heavy reliance on Western approaches and is considered weak in resources and networks.

Higher education quantitative expansion trends should be supported by institutionalizing quality assurance measures and be prepared to address emerging issues such as the recent pandemic. Accordingly, HEIs in Ethiopia need to make use of the current virtual and blended learning environment to initiate flexible platforms without neglecting indigenous and lifelong practices.

Unless HEIs exploit existing favorable situations, some of these opportunities may be lost or turn to threats. Hence, parallel to promoting the internationalization of higher

education, the de-internationalization HEIs has to be exercised to scale up homegrown strategies.

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