Why Has HIV/AIDS Become a Concern for Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)? What Can be Done?

Firdissa Jebessa[*]

Introduction

The HIV/AIDS pandemic which is killing teachers at an alarming rate in many developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is delivering devastating blows to students, future job possibilities and quality of life. Moreover, there is an increased rate of teachers absenteeism from duties and loss of educators, inspectors, planners and management personnel.

Although these losses are more evident in sub-Saharan African countries, they occur throughout the developing world. A recent World Bank (2004) study warns that in some countries AIDS is killing teachers at a faster rate than their replacements can be trained. The pandemic affects not only the supply of education but also the quality and management of education at institutions of higher learning, and schools. It also does the same in regional and national levels.

We all agree that HEIs as part of their over all foci, have crucial roles to play in mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on the health and well being of their members. Large numbers of people directly depend on HEIs. As a result, the fate of the society as a whole is closely intertwined with the health and well being of the public servants in which case HEIs are the major producers.

This paper, therefore, describes some of the rationales concerning why Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions should think, recapitulate and act in all their talks and walks about the pandemic. Many of the ideas are syntheses of different level research works, discussion undertakings and some are my own personal reflections.

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Why Has HIV/AIDS Become a Concern For Ethiopian HEIs?

With no doubt, many people may ask "Why does HIV/AIDS concern Ethiopian HEIs?" This is a question we must answer decisively. There is no doubt that the HIV/AIDS epidemic poses the most serious threat in recent memory to Ethiopian society and our economy. Above all, it is threatening the trained manpower (World Bank, 2004).

A syntheses of research findings show that there are basically five reasons in which members of the higher education community should be interested and involved in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. These are:

- **HIV/AIDS is a development issue, not just a health issue**. The epidemic affects not just the health, but also the social, economic and psychological status of individuals and communities. The dimensions of its problem are far larger than a medical issue. Thus, HIV/AIDS is more than a disease.
- **HIV/AIDS affects not just individuals but institutions**. Higher education institutions are resources for a nation. All the evidences tell us that these institutions are vulnerable to the impacts of HIV/AIDS and their core operations of management, teaching, research and community outreach. Therefore, they need to take account of the impacts of the epidemic.
- **HIV/AIDS affects human resource development.** Higher education institutions including ours are the educators and trainers of the most skilled people in most economies. Without planned and sustainable efforts to prevent and change behaviors, students are particularly vulnerable to this infection due to factors that make institutional environments a focal point of social and sexual interactions. We are at risk of losing the most valuable citizens in our economy.
- **The struggle against HIV/AIDS requires new knowledge**. The roles of the higher education institutions are prized in the development of new technologies, theories, practices and ways of understanding our world through research. These roles are critical

in our search for new and better ways of preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and learning to understand and cope with the world that is affected by HIV/AIDS.
- **The fight against HIV/AIDS requires leadership.** Universities/ colleges, professionals, students and associated communities should be called upon to take a stand against denial and prejudice; and to lead open debates and social actions against the epidemic.

A World Bank Sector study (2004) indicates that HIV/AIDS holds the potential to undermine a country's substantial investments in education. When it affects teachers, it reduces the supply of educational services. When it affects the financial resources of students and families, it weakens the demand for education.

According to the same source, AIDS, now, exists within all regions of Ethiopia. The estimated national infection rate is 10.8%. This rate is substantially above the 5.0% level at which the infection tends to expand rapidly and exponentially. Higher education communities are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. This is due to their age group (which constitutes the peak period for sexual activity and the consequent risk of HIV infection), close physical proximity, relative autonomy from adult or community supervision, and inclination on investments made by families and government in the education of tertiary students.   Indeed, AIDS, now, constitutes a new and irreversible form of "brain drain" in Africa.   In spite of this risk, universities in Ethiopia have not yet established institutional policies or programs for the management and prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Preliminary results from a major study on HIV/AIDS in the Ethiopian education sector were recently presented to the Ministry of Education. The study indicated that:
- HIV/AIDS positive teachers were found to be about 10,000. It is shown that 22% of teachers attrition is due to this epidemic.

- recruitment of teachers needs to increase by 16% annually to achieve MDG goals in the presence of HIV/AIDS.
- as it is true in other countries, absenteeism is likely to have a bigger impact on education supply than mortality.

The implications for universities, though they are not stated in the report are clear:

- an increase in the number of graduates will be required to offset the anticipated losses of secondary school teachers and graduates working in other sectors;
- Ministry of Education and university officials need to develop an integrated strategy for the dissemination of new HIV/AIDS awareness materials, and to create university courses that are designed to equip students and academic staff not only with knowledge, but also with skills and values to protect themselves from the epidemic.

The World Bank Sector study report also notes the unsatisfied demand for materials on HIV/AIDS (teachers guides, textbooks, supplementary readers, model syllabi, etc.) from the Ministry of Education. Materials currently in use have been obtained from other sources, such as the health sector and NGOs (World Bank, 2004).

What Can be Done by our HEIs in Response to the Challenges of HIV/AIDS?

In responding to the challenges of HIV/AIDS, HEIs have two major responsibilities:

- They must protect their continued functioning as effective and efficient as possible and;
- They must respond dynamically to the needs of an AIDS-affected society.

To fulfill these responsibilities, HEIs should concentrate on five key strategic areas. These are:

- developing appropriate policy and management structures;

- giving care and support for staff and students;
- producing AIDS-competent graduates in the necessary areas of specialization, and in an adequate number;
- having dynamic multi-disciplinary collaborative researches on every aspect of HIV/AIDS and its impacts; and
- working closely with the society at all levels (public and private sectors; civil society and its organs; communities and individuals; local, regional and international organizations) and offering interactive services to the needs of the society.

Our Higher Education institutions should be nationally co-coordinated and improved in their capacities so as to prevent, manage and mitigate the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They are expected to make invaluable contributions to research on HIV/AIDS and lead the way in advocacy programs. They also need to work more so as to put in place institutions wide comprehensive policies and programs for prevention, treatment, care and support. Leaders in the higher education community have to commit themselves to put in place policies, procedures and programs through an initiative which aims at keeping students and staff free from the threat of the infection and ensuring that those who are infected or affected are supported. They, thus, remain active, productive and valued members of the higher education community in particular and assets of the country in general.

HEIs, thus, should assess knowledge and use of International and National guidelines in responding to HIV/AIDS, possibilities to be undertaken in teaching/training programs, and research undertakings in research sections and /or Institutes, possibilities of collaborations with Communities, HEIs management mandates; and the potentials of distance education mode to respond to the challenges of HIV/AIDS. These have been briefed one after the other in the next sub-sections.

Knowledge and Use of International and National Guidelines in Responding to HIV/AIDS

Our Higher Education Institutions should know and exercise:

- international and National guidelines;
- the National and International legislatives and policy frameworks;
- HE legislation and policy on HIV/AIDS (if any); and
- guiding principles that protect the rights of every person, amongst others, the right to equality, dignity, privacy and fair labor practices while responding to HIV/AIDS. Similarly, any workplace response to HIV/AIDS must be based on an understanding of the rights of persons infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

What can be Done in the Areas of Teaching/Training Programs?

These days, circumstances need that all graduates to be AIDS-competent must be well informed on how the pandemic relates to their professional areas of expertise and must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to mange HIV/AIDS in their subsequent professional life.

The fact that in many countries, including Ethiopia, teachers are dying in great numbers by the infection indicates that new and more effective strategies have to be devised to address this issue. Teachers need to be better educated not only about HIV/AIDS and its transmission, but also on how to become better advocators and lobbyers in the fight against the infection.

The response of the curriculum in universities to the imperatives of HIV/AIDS has to be re-strengthened. It is crucial to introduce life-skills curricula early in primary school since HIV-prevention activities have been shown to be more effective among youngsters who are not yet sexually active. Then, this activity can proceed to the tertiary level. Among the important components of the life-skills curricula are issues of gender equity, how to develop healthy lifestyles and healthy reproductive attitudes, and an understanding of when and how to protect the communities of a school or an institution from the HIV

infection. Life skills should be taught in an environment with other HIV-prevention interventions.

Among the ways that HEIs can consider to limit and respond to the challenges of HIV/AIDS are:

- ensuring that HIV/AIDS content is integrated into all the academic course areas, especially in the curriculum for graduate teachers;
- giving special training on how to teach HIV/AIDS preventation to future Biology teachers who are responsible for HIV/AIDS instruction in high schools;
- offering training to student and peer counselors about HIV/AIDS counseling;
- campus students' clinics should offer free condoms to students and faculty in a non-threatening way and facilitate voluntary testing; and
- HIV/AIDS prevention needs to be part of the institutional information marketing service (World Bank, 2004).

Therefore, as a first step to implement some of the specific national and international guidelines, HEIs, together with the Ministry of Education (MOE), are encouraged to develop and implement effective responses aimed at protecting students and staff. In addition, MOE and the respective HEIs are encouraged to develop and implement a work place policy to protect both at all levels.

It is also required to encourage professionals to talk and think about the curriculum issues, both within and among institutions. There is a need to establish networks of teacher educators, curriculum specialists, engineers, architects, social scientists, cultural specialists, gender specialists, legal educators, health science personnel, and other professional groups from higher institutions across Ethiopia. This may stimulate individuals in these networks to be creative, innovative and realistic to mainstream HIV/AIDS education into the professional aspects of their programs.

An important aspect of development in this area is the need to establish different channels for different professional groups. While there are undoubtedly some commonalities, mainstreaming HIV/AIDS into a curriculum of a professional discipline requires a sharper focus that can see the interaction between the disease and a professional area. This is how to manage this interaction and ensure that the advancement of professional interests or activities do not contribute to the spread of HIV infection, whether for the professionals themselves, for their workers, or for the communities in which they serve. In doing so, our HEIs can make use of HIV/AIDS Training Framework by adapting or adopting those developed somewhere else.

What can be Done in the Areas of Research?

Responding to the needs and challenges of an AIDS-affected society calls for wide-ranging new perspectives on research, a greater commitment to multidisciplinary and collaborative research within and among our institutions, a wider sharing of knowledge and insights, the establishment of data-bases and information-sharing networks, facilitating access to library and other information sources in all parts of the country, and connectivity among professionals in different institutions and also with those working in communities, hospitals, aid agencies, NGOs, and various government ministries and line departments nationally and internationally.

What do We Mean by Ethics in Research?

The principle of ethics in research dictates that interests of research subjects or communities should be paramount. Research should be based on free and informed consent, non-obtrusive and non-coercive manner, and the results should be made available to the community for a timely and an appropriate action.

Collaborating with Communities in HIV/AIDS Issues

Another area that our higher education institutions must address in responding to HIV/AIDS is collaborating with the communities, in which they are embedded. They should interact with them, learn from them, and serve them. This is a cardinal responsibility of concerned institutions in general and part of our professional work in particular. It has become even more of a responsibility when HEIs, a community, region or country is plagued by HIV/AIDS.

Our Higher education institutions have the responsibility to serve the society actively. They must never allow themselves to become "ivory towers" where academic interests are pursued in splendid isolation from the cares and concerns of communities. Instead, they must hear what communities and society identify as their problems and then the institutions should place their expertise jointly to search for solutions to the problems.

HEIs Management Response to the Challenge of HIV/AIDS

One of the most challenging tasks faced by an institution is to re-work its vision, policy framework and management structures so that these take account of the AIDS pandemic, both within the institution and in the society. The knowledge acquired, and the learning and the training offered in higher institutions need to serve the society. Institutions can be greatly helped in this task by interacting with one another and exchanging strategies. Manifestly, there is a need for higher education institutions' leaders in MOE, across the nation and Africa, to talk more to one another about their HIV/AIDS policies, strategies, management structures they envisage in responding to the disease on their campuses and in their surrounding communities.

As the survey report of the World Bank (2004) indicates, institutional policies for the management of HIV/AIDS cover a range of important actions, ranging from establishing a management information data base (on absenteeism, health centre visits, medical benefit expenditures, student drop-outs, etc.) to a review of regulations on

sick leave, confidentiality and the rights of persons living with AIDS, [from student counseling services to awareness raising programs, and from curriculum content to testing facilities].

For this, visionary leadership and management commitment to HIV/AIDS have to be identified as an essential component of an effective HIV/AIDS program. Leadership requires not only leading the faculties/colleges or departments technically but also acting as an example or role model so as to inspire others. This requires HEI managers to respond to the epidemic in the following ways:

- making a commitment to HIV/AIDS workplace issues;
- making a personal commitment to act as an 'AIDS ambassador';
- developing commitment to HIV/AIDS issues in others;
- acting on this commitment by ensuring that strategies are developed;
- implementing, monitoring and evaluating strategies;
- establishing multi-level structures and partnerships responsible for all aspects of the institutional HIV/AIDS response;
- showing leadership and commitment to manage HIV/AIDS;
- developing the institutional HIV/AIDS policy;
- conducting risk assessments;
- conducting planning for HIV/AIDS programs, and integrating this into college, faculty and/or departmental strategic plans;
- reviewing human resource policies and implementation processes;
- maintaining and enhancing service delivery;
- managing employees benefits;
- allocating enough budget for the cost of HIV/AIDS programs; and
- overseeing and monitoring departmental HIV/AIDS programs.

HEIs leaders need to have visions such as:

- no student and staff is infected with HIV;
- a University or college community should respond to the epidemic with compassion and responsible behavior;
- a supportive environment should be considered for people living with HIV/AIDS, and
- playing an appropriate role in the battle against HIV/AIDS in the communities surrounding the University or college.

Conclusion

It is only through informed and imaginative use and mobilization of available resources that HEIs can appropriately respond to HIV/AIDS. The envisaged responses of our higher education institutions to the challenges of HIV/AIDS necessitate a wide-ranging re-examination of the institutions mandate, mission and policy framework. These must be re-modeled to take account of the prevalence and impacts of the pandemic within the institutions themselves in particular and within the society in which the institutions function at large.

This can be achieved through imaginative leadership and inspirations of all stakeholders to halt the preventable spread of HIV/AIDS, and to provide a decent life for all citizens of Ethiopia. Every necessary leadership acts which prevents HIV/AIDS and helps those living with the epidemic should be developed and implemented in full and without delay.

Above all, Ethiopian HEIs should accept that implementing strategic plans of anti HIV/AIDS campaign will strengthen their academic functions, their efforts to manage the impacts of HIV/AIDS, and enhance knowledge and information generation and development.

In sum, the Ethiopian government in general and HEIs in particular have to place the epidemic highest on their list of priority agendas. Particularly, HIV/AIDS dimension must enter into every facet of the HEIs' business, especially its core business of knowledge

transmission (teaching), knowledge generation (research), and knowledge sharing (engagement with society)(Kelly, 2004).

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