BUILDING CAPACITIES IN THE CIVIL SERVICE

A Quest for Transforming Ethiopian Higher Education System (HES): Implications for Public Sector Transformation, by Firdissa Jebessa Aga*

Abstract

The Higher Education System (HEIs) are demanded, nowadays more than ever before, to be frontiers of public sector transformation by directing their research, teaching, and services to societal needs; and by delivering transformative outcomes. Practically, nonetheless, the Ethiopian HES is currently facing unprecedented challenges, which cannot be abated unless systematic transformation is put in place. The Purpose of the study was, therefore, to investigate the hitherto reform rationales and the causes for some reform failures, and the feasible expeditions for transforming the Ethiopian HES. Exclusively a qualitative approach was used by generating data from document scrutiny and interviews. The results have shown that the hitherto reform rationales were the HEIs' mandates, aspirations, expectations; dynamisms, challenges; and failed previous reforms due to top-down initiatives, loose accountability and momentum, unengaged leadership, undesirable institutional culture, piecemeal/surface symptoms, nominal board assignment and culture, unaligned budget with mission, overly and ineffective communication, and focusing just on the visible ignoring the invisibles. Ways of transforming the HES and sustaining it demands aligning transformation initiatives with the institutional mandates, aspirations, expectations, and the dynamisms; progressively overcoming the challenges; approaching transformation systemically; transforming the very assumptions of HES; building a culture of indigenous knowledge paradigm; institutionalizing transformation endeavors; enhancing ownership and instructional leadership; and enforcing autonomy with accountability.

Keywords: Reform, Higher Education, Transformation, Quality Education, Public Sector

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Background and Introduction

Higher Education (HE) is an ideal place, and the professionals therein are ideal people to impact graduates, workforces, other sectors, and society. HE "can and should be a major catalyst for development in all its dimensions, and the wider transformation of [a] society" (CHE, 2015:2). HE can do this by transforming, liberating or freeing the individual students, and giving them a chance to develop reasoning and critical thinking skills. Transformation of students is informed by what is taught, how it is taught, how the work is assessed and how students process the information (Masuku et al. 2021).

In so doing, HE is one of the key drivers of growth and performance, prosperity, and competitiveness in global, national, regional and local economies. It has a wide-ranging, proven influence on the economy through producing people who are: 1) life-long learners; 2) critical and creative thinkers; 3) analyzers and solvers of problems; 4) well informed, empowered, committed, and deeply motivated; and 5) knowledgeable, skillful, enlightened, inspired and innovative citizens, possibly with quality and by quality wherein people are at the center of Input-Process-output-Impact (Firdissa, 2018, 2022; Masuku, Jili, & Sabela, 2021).

Inasmuch as the role of HE is closely linked to development, it is entrusted with: 1) arming graduates with relevant competencies, increasing their employability, and boosting their earning power; 2) bestowing on workers the necessary competencies and/or upgrading the existing; 3) generating research and innovation, diffusing them- with the aim of finding solutions to critical challenges; 4) feeding into a knowledge-based economy, which depends on a highly skilled, well-educated, and technically-equipped workforce; 5) contributing to the rate of technical progress or a rise in 'total' productivity by increasing labor and capital productivity; and 6) standing a hub for knowledge management, and knowledge sharing so as to build a more sustainable world- economically, socially, and politically (Firdissa, 2022).

A closer scrutiny of the HE environments have also shown that the sector is changing rapidly due to the rise of a knowledge-based society; social, economic and information globalization; increased demand for higher education; and changes in the political and social environment of many countries including ours-all of which influence the HES in many ways.

First, since the latter half of the 20th century, we have been witnessing a shift from economic growth led by mass production industry based on the established technology- to knowledge-based growth in which hard and soft innovation (creation of knowledge) has a higher economic value. Second, due to the striking development of information technology in recent years, the movement of people, goods, money and information has become much easier, and globalization of the world economy has been accelerated (Firdissa, 2022). Third, the rising demand for higher education (earlier following World War II) has come with the necessity of mastering new knowledge and technology demanding educational credentials. Consequently, HE has been remarkably expanded throughout the world, and yet at varying rates and degrees of achievement. Fourth, changes in political and social environments of many countries from the 1990s and the recent international situation have demanded the HE sector to contribute to the development of a healthy civil society and cultivation of social cohesion (Ibid).

In further closer scrutiny of Ethiopia's policies, programs, projects, and efforts manifests that the country aspires to achieve all-inclusive prosperity. To materialize that, it has legislated HE specific national legal policies and strategies, frameworks, and roles and responsibilities; and planned, invested, and expanded HEIs resulting in a remarkable increase in institutions, programs and student enrollments both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in public as well as in private HEIs. The expansion, and increments are in line with the intent of the country to:
1) establish a HE system which produces skilled, knowledgeable and enlightened workforce for the emerging economy.
2) focus higher education programs and curricula on areas critical to the vision of the nation.
3) guarantee the relevance and quality of the functions and programs of the HES; and
4) ensure inclusiveness and diversity at all levels (Firdissa, 2022).

The Ethiopian HE, as elsewhere, is in an era of both opportunities and challenges. In the first place, we are witnessing, a renewed passion for higher education, research, and innovation; accountability to taxpayers by adding values for the bucks and for the bungs- leading to authentic transformation, and interconnectedness, globalization, and networked designs all catalyzing the role of HE for development by producing enlightened workforce, creating knowledge, and serving the citizens.

Secondly, on the other hand, the Ethiopian HE is facing unprecedented challenges due to different reasons (see problem statement). Both extremes (opportunities and challenges) have catalyzed the HES to undergo substantial changes and transformations impacting global, regional, national, and local contexts; some have created new opportunities while others have generated new challenges. His learning, teaching, research, and services are, therefore, affected by the physical and psychosocial effects of these and the demands of the day. So, it is a survival strategy to stand answerable to the demands of the day by delivering transformative outcomes-revitalizing the ways of knowledge creation, preservation, dissemination, extension, application, and innovation, cognizant of global and local circumstances.

There are major rationales that motivated HEIs to make reformations. HEIs are currently under pressure to withstand the effects of technology, globalization and competition. Whereas

technology influences the functioning of institutions in the marketplace and reshapes pedagogy and teaching, globalization allows the free flow of ideas, capital, people, goods around the world-implying aftermath effects on identity and culture (Fägerlind, & Strömqvist, 2004).

As Salim (2009: ix) indicates "…the World Bank sought policy developments and innovations to encourage reforms leading to greater access, equity, relevance, and quality in … tertiary education systems". In line with this and as part of survival mechanism, many HEIs including those in Ethiopia have introduced various reforms. These reforms have changed the way their activities are organized, how services are provided, and the way institutions are managed. Such a process of reformation has become a survival strategy to improve the relevance and quality of the concerned HEIs' programs, curricula, and courses. The survival quest of many HEIs' systems has required a painful reformation resulting in changing their governance systems, management/administration, and leadership.

Whereas the change in *governance systems* affected the HEIs' decision-making structures and processes, that of *management/administration* dealt with the implementation of the decisions, and that of *leadership* affected the roles and processes through which individuals sought to influence the decisions (Gayle, Tewarie and White ,*2003,* cited in Firdissa, 2008; Varghese, 2009).

Taking and implementing the decisions can entail creating new structures, specific criteria to allocate resources for various activities, the allotment of tasks to various groups and performance evaluation. Consequently, restructurings took place affecting offices, positions and formal roles within the HEIs involved in any sort of reformation. This then has brought the search for normative criteria that formed the basis for the distribution of responsibilities and resources to all level academic units within the pertinent institutions (Ibid).

The practices of institutional restructuring imply applying efficiency parameters and accountability measures. Many HEIs have reorganized their activities in a cost-conscious corporate style; even though they remain within the public sector domain. This institutional restructuring process is the single most important change that has taken place in HEIs over the past decades. Despite once being considered as organizations that resist changes, HEIs are now being transformed at a very fast rate beyond reformations (Varghese, *2009; Firdissa, 2008*).

The efforts to restructure/reform HEIs have resulted in changing the way they function and affected the varying stakeholders' interests in one way or another. Inasmuch as reformation is becoming a survival strategy, a continuous process of bargaining and negotiating is significant in the process of the reformation efforts. There are also variations among the different HEIs in implementing the changes as some have been more successful than others (Varghese, 2009, Firdissa, 2008).

The hitherto witnessed reformation endeavors have inevitably impacted the concerned HEIs' programs, curricula, courses, research, structures and activities in a way that the HEIs could align themselves with HEIs in other countries including those in Europe and the Western world. Some HEIs have started exchanging programs and credit transfer systems (Firdissa, 2016). Along with this, there are efforts to develop viable structures and evaluation systems that have helped to put in place internationalization and exchange programs. The institutional reformation efforts have resulted in new structural reorganization, setting new visions and missions, and putting in place improved governance and decision-making processes. Whereas most decisions on the reorganization of faculties, on new courses and fees are made at the top institutional level; decisions regarding course delivery, assessment and quality care have, in most cases, been decentralized to the lower academic units (Firdissa, 2022, 2016).

Addis Ababa University had initiated different reform initiatives at different times including

Business Process Reengineering (BPR) design, which was nationally initiated in all sectors in Ethiopia during the early 21st century. Whereas the University achieved its intentions of the reforms, there, however, were several shortfalls to achieve the ideally acceptable reform initiatives (AAU, 2012 a, b; Firdissa, 2016).

Problem Statement

Though HEIs are optimistically engaged in any sort of reform initiatives, their landscape is both in enthusiasm, and worries. In the first place, our time is witnessing: 1) a renewed enthusiasm for higher education, research, and innovation; 2) accountability to taxpayers by adding values for the bucks and for the bungs- leading to authentic transformation; and 3) interconnectedness, globalization, and networked designs all catalyzing the role of HE for development. As a result, the Global HE sector has well established processes and procedures for producing an enlightened workforce, creating knowledge, and serving citizens.

Secondly, on the other hand, the HER system is facing challenges that are also threatening the economy as well as mankind on earth. Exacerbating the case, the fast-emerging technological advancement has brought both excitement and trepidation as they influence the HEIs' functions, implementations, opening new avenues for recruitment, student support, research collaboration, staff development, and teaching and learning resource development (CHE, 2015). HEIs are, therefore, hassled with accelerated (technological and market) changes, globalization and increased competition, universality of business, scarcity of resources, a shift from industrialized to knowledge–based economy, image building, and achieving customer expectations. This calls for transformation of the HEIs' core mission, vision and values by going beyond the accustomed superficial reform wits, and taken for granted orthodoxy routines (CHE, 2015; Firdissa, 2016).

Whereas HE is expected to be a catalyst of societal transformation, "key constituencies and interest groups … are persistently arguing that higher education is not fulfilling these purposes and might in instances be a conservative force reproducing the status quo" CHE, 2015:2). Notwithstanding the Ethiopian Government's commitment to legislate, invest and expand the HES, there are issues of concern-some of which have existed long, whereas others have never been predicted until their happenings. A closer scrutiny of the Ethiopian HES shows, it is facing unprecedented challenges due to: 1) unmatched resources to expansion endeavors; 2) poorly led diversification of provisions; 3) unled new modes of delivery; 4) unsubstantiated heterogeneous student bodies; 5) unpreparedness for the growing internationalization of higher education; 6) unpreparedness for research and innovation as leveraging knowledge production; 7) world market pressures; 7) grand and petty corruption, and rent seeking mind-sets; and 8) economic turmoil; governance risks; unpredictability, turbulence, and consequent crises threatening mankind (Firdissa, 2022).

Understandability, the rapid expansion of higher education has brought about declining quality at HEIs. The country's lack of instructional leadership culture and systemic and systematic handling of the sector exacerbated the threats to the sector. Equally, the efforts to reach the HES very close to nations, nationalities and peoples of the country were benightedly led. Consequently, quality in Ethiopian HEIs has remained *searching a black gold in a dark room*. Practices show that emphasis and resources have been directed to quantitative gains by enrolling and graduating students with low or no concern for quality. Whereas quantitative gains can stand as surface symptoms, they cannot be bottom-lines and sine qua non for the aspired development. Equally, there is loose management commitment to quality initiatives because many leaders are busy in political commitments, and fire- fighting, not in quality assurance matters. Studies show that 80% of quality initiatives fail in the first two years, mainly because of lack of senior management backing and commitment (Sallis, 20022; Firdissa, 2022).

These all enfeebled our HES' readiness to overcome the hassles that have come along with environmental and technological changes; the need for accountability; insufficiency of

resources; and unpredictability in the politics- all limiting the sector's contributions to the development endeavors to the required level. There is minimal readiness in some countries including Ethiopia for transforming there HE systems. In some countries "the political and administrative ranks are utterly unprepared to assume their new role of providing sound and consistent guidance and strategic orientation regarding the longer-term goals and directions in national higher education and science policies" (Hénard, 2010: 43-44, citing Fried, 2006).

Ethiopia is putting in place an autonomous system (starting with AAU as the first flagship Autonomous University as of 2024), the country's HEIs cannot continue business as usual in knowledge production, preservation, application, and use. The current Ethiopian HE landscapes demands a liberated mind-set and instilling a culture of accountability, and eventually transforms HEIs along with their revitalized vision, mission, and goals.

Overall, the Ethiopian HES as a whole and HEIs specifically are currently under pressure with environmental accelerated changes and instability, increased competition, universality of business, technological changes, scarcity of resources, shift from industrialized to knowledge–based societies, achieving customer expectations, image, effects of technology, globalization and competition, and the need for volition and accountability. This in turn calls for discerning HEIs' reform rationales, reasons for failures, and devising ways of transforming the HEIs beyond the shortfalls.

Objectives of the study

The study intended to achieve the following three objectives:
1)   To assess HES reform initiatives and their rationales,
2)   To investigate the whys and wherefores of HES reform failures, and
3)   To find ways of transforming HE system.
Inherent within these objectives are the quests for transforming the Ethiopian HES beyond the hitherto piecemeal reform initiatives. To achieve the objectives, the study raised and answered three questions such as 1) What are the HES reform initiatives and their rationales? 2) Why did many HES reform initiatives fail? 2) What are the feasible ways of transforming the HES?

The Research methodology

The study relied upon a qualitative approach by reviewing existing literature related to the HEIs' reform initiatives, their rationales and failures, and devising ways of transforming the HE system. This then was corroborated by interviews conducted with 5 purposely selected professionals (3 from Addis Ababa University, and 2 from the Ministry of Education). Whereas the data from existing literature were used to guide in making inferences concerning the current study, the data-obtained from the interviews have been interspersed along the review results, leading to conclusions and driving implications for public sector transformation.

Codes were used to maintain the anonymity of the data sources by designating Int1, Int2, Int3, Int4, and Int5 respectively for interviewee one, interviewee two, interviewee three, interviewee four, and interviewee five. Whereas Int1, Int2, and Int3 were from AAU; Int4 and Int5 were from the Ministry of Education (one from the Head office, the other from Education and Training Authority). Reviewing existing literature and the interviews were guided by the three themes: the HES reform initiatives and their rationales, the whys and wherefores of the HES reform failures; and feasible ways of transforming the HES.

Results and Discussions

The results are discussed under the three themes: the HES reform initiatives and their rationales, the whys and wherefores of the HES reform failures; and feasible ways of transforming the HES.

HES Reform Initiatives and Rationales

The HES is currently under pressure with accelerated changes and all sorts of instability; and for meeting customer expectations, image building, effects of technology, demands of globalization and internationalization. To overcome such influences and to sustain their survival mechanism, many HEIs including those in Ethiopia introduced various reformations at different times. They are required to go through different sorts of reforms along with the survival demands. As a result, some HEIs have changed the way their activities were organized, how their services were provided and the way they were managed.

Document scrutiny and interviews have shown that many of the changes in some HEIs were just focused on receiving orders from the top and implementing them in most cases by restructuring academic units, creating new organograms, mobilizing resources, and focusing on excessive communications. Some HEIs also initiated reforms along new technologies and to meet the demands for globalization. This is because, the HEIs' functioning in the marketplace is influenced; their teaching-learning, research, and services delivery are reshaped-by the emerging technology wherein globalization allows the free flow of ideas, capital, people, goods around the world-implying aftermath effects on the identities and cultures of the HEIs (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004).

Along with their mandates and expectations, HEIs also initiated reforms by giving attention to the challenges, obstacles and affordances which might inhibit or enhance their capacities to fulfil their core functions – research, teaching and learning and social engagement (Cloete & Maasen, 2015, cited in CHE, 2015).

Different universities in Africa have introduced different reform measures at different times as a survival strategy. Many of the change initiatives were, nonetheless, driven from top by government policies under total centralization of the systems, wherein political leaders are the main drivers (Huisman, Smolentseva, Froumin, 2018). Other than the politically driven initiatives, reforms were also initiated due to the demands of: 1) the knowledge economy, which demands high level competencies, skills and attitudes; development and the need for redress, the transformation of the core functions of the HEIs; and 2) producing critical, skilled, and socially-committed graduates who would be capable of contributing to the holistic development of the nation (CHE, 2015, 2013; Ngara, 2003).

As Varghese (2016) indicates, the University of Ghana, for instance, had initiated reforms in 2010 that related to its governing structure, primarily to overcome its own internal anomalies. For that purpose, a visitation panel was established to undertake and report on the reform initiative. The University had noticed that it was impossible to continue its business within the then existing administrative structures along with the shortage of resources that occurred as a result of decline in the economic fortunes of the country, which had caused: 1) decline in the quality of infrastructural development; 2) difficulty in retaining teaching staff; 3) decline in learning quality along with the increase in student numbers; 4) a decline in academic standards and general service delivery; and 5) examination malpractice during the 2004/05 academic year (COL, 2007, cited in Varghese, 2016).

The same source further indicates that upon receipt of the visitation panel's report, the Council of the University discussed it at different stages and with pertinent stakeholders and decided: 1) that the committee structure was required for the functioning of the Council; 2) to replace the existing Executive Committee of the Academic Board with an enlarged Business and Executive Committee to deal expeditiously with Business matters of the Academic Board; and 3) on matters of discipline, the system of ad hoc disciplinary committee was replaced with standing disciplinary committee with executive powers to impose sanctions.

Some of the recommendations of the panel, nonetheless, required an amendment of the University's Act ratified by the national parliament. The governance structure of the

University was considered a key factor in any reform exercise, among other considerations. A memorandum was, therefore, proposed a new council system with the purpose of modifying the role and composition of the University Council, restructuring and reorganizing the existing dysfunctional organizational structure by expanding the membership of the Council from fifteen to over twenty members. This was to enable it to play an effective role as the governing body of the University (Ghana, 2010).

the same vein, some of the Ethiopian HEIs had introduced various reforms as part of the survival mechanism by overcoming their state of hopeless pride, status quo, quantitative targets/gains, ad hoc and rubber stumping decisions, and institutional fatigue (Int2). Two of the interviewees (Int1 & Int3) also indicated that there were several rationales for the HEIs' reform initiatives specifically in the Ethiopian context. Common from the rationales were to overcome challenges, and to achieve the HEIs' aspirations to be centers of excellence in teaching, research, and services delivery by applying efficiency parameters and accountability measures.

For instance, AAU had introduced many important reform initiatives at different times. Among others, the University's rationale to initiate one of its reforms was to materialize its aspiration to become one of the top pre-eminent African graduate and research universities through creation and dissemination of knowledge dedicated to critical inquiry, innovation, and public action in an academic community that cultivates and celebrates equity and diversity (AAU, 2015). The University had also been making tireless efforts to make its functions meet international standards in the provision of high-quality teaching, learning, research and services (AAU, 2015). Consequently, there were various long- and short-term reform initiatives aimed, particularly, at the improvement of the quality and relevance of its functions along with its mandates and expectations of the different stakeholders. Some of the initiatives at AAU were Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), General Education Quality Improvement Program Project (GEQUIP), Balanced Scorecard (BSC), Continuous Professional Development (CPD) initiatives, Modular curricula development and implementation, pedagogical reform that would both support students from diverse backgrounds and prepare them for the challenges of the global economy and eventually to enable them to be responsible citizens.

Regarding these initiatives, Int1 indicated that the University had the hope that its graduates would be equipped with saleable competencies, and that the University could make the highest possible contribution to students/graduates in various forms including programs that promote the graduates' successful integration into the world of work, the world of life, and that would enable them to make meaningful contributions to the country's development. Efforts were made to make changes to bring a new model of teaching and learning, research and work-integrated learning, focus on learning as the primary outcome of education, assessment as a priority to measuring student success and institutional effectiveness, and developmental education (AAU, 2015).

Specifically, the 2012 AAU's reform was due to the observed deficiencies within the previous reforms, mainly the BPR design that had been put in place as of June 2009. The University sought to re-initiate another reform as it had witnessed some shortcomings in its governance that had put the daily business of the University in a limbo due to: multiple tiers of hierarchy, lack of clarity of roles, inefficient and backward system of the administrative and support services, department level anomalies and lack of empowerment, fragmentation of end-to-end processes, and many more (AAU, 2012 a, b). In addition to being rationales to begin new reform, these were also reasons for reform initiative failures as they were learnt from failed reform initiatives at AAU.

nt2 also had the view that HEIs in our country enter any sort of reform to fulfill the diverse stakeholders' expectations by overcoming their status quo and conservativeness. Some HEIs strive even to the extent of going beneath the surface, and engaging in transformation, though they end in vain due to the challenges explained hereunder in the whys and wherefores of HES reform failures.

The Whys and Wherefores of HES Reform Failures

While reform initiatives have brought incremental alterations of the HES landscape, and quantitative increments in institutions, staff, student, and leadership in Ethiopia, as is the case in many African countries; they, nonetheless, haven't brought sustainable and vibrant transformations demanded in today's knowledge economy. The issue can be seen by citing the cases of different countries including that of Ethiopia with special focus on AAU's initiatives. For instance, while the HE sectors in South Africa "is profoundly different from the apartheid inheritance, it has some distance to travel before it can be declared that the imbalances of [the] past legacy have been eradicated, and that transformation goals have been fully achieved" (CHE, 2015:2).

The Ethiopian HES also tried to put in place different reform initiatives. It, nonetheless, failed to excel along with its mandates, expectations and the dynamisms. The accustomed reform initiatives have not enabled the Ethiopian HES to get out of its numerous challenges. The challenges are mainly related to governance that initiates the reforms top-down. For instance, the AAU's reform processes in most cases had been halted due to lose accountability and momentum, lack of instructional leadership, and unengaged and less empowered leadership-resulting in lack of shared vision, empowerment, ownership, commitment, and transparent and objective decision-making process (Int4). In the same vein, Int5 indicated that the failures of the hitherto reform initiatives at many of the universities, and mainly at AAU could be attributed to lose accountability, dogmatic institutional culture and deep-rooted status-quo, ad hoc and rubber stumping decisions, fragmentation, institutional fatigue, uninvolved mind-set/indecisiveness, loose alignment of financial outcomes to the core mission, and overly communication beyond achievements.

Int1 also indicated that reform initiatives in Ethiopia failed due to: "lack of accountability, top-down initiatives, lack of ownership by the respective HEIs' communities, piecemeal initiatives, just changing surface symptoms, with no depth and groundedness". Particularly, no one was accountable for any failed reform initiatives as things were pushed down from the top. This portends that there was a wobbly line of accountability to the taxpayers by adding values for the bucks and for the bungs that could lead to authentic transformation of the HES.

Lack of instructional leadership had resulted in failures to enact a shared vision, to plan implementable activities, to empower and to support frontline implementers, and to create enabling working and learning environments. For instance, the new structural set-up and governance system of AAU, which had been put in place as of June 2009 following the BPR design failed before implementation. The University found itself in a situation where it could not achieve efficiency, effectiveness, quality, flexibility, customer-centeredness, and responsiveness. Several challenges limited the University with the: deep-rooted status-quo and established ways of doing the business. Among others, the University had identified challenges such as: 1) lengthy and multiple chains of command, diffusion of responsibilities, and fragmented decision making practices; 2) omission of some designed work processes and inclusion of others not designed; 3) lack of clarity of roles; 4) inefficient and backward system of the administrative and support services; 5) department level anomalies and lack of empowerment; and 6) separation of outreach and university-industry partnership from research (AAU, 2012 a, b). These challenges were also rationales to initiate yet another reform initiatives as indicated under the HES reform initiatives and rationales sub-section of this paper.

In short, lack of readiness for change among the University community, inadequate IT support, lack of capacity to properly allocate and utilize budget have been the limiting factors to fully implement the BPR design. Overall, the reform introduced in the system lacked efficiency and

adequate capacity. There were also inadequate structural alignment/relocation failing to do away with the backward work cultures, lengthy and multiple chains of commands, and diffusion of responsibilities.

Discussions made with Int3, Int4 and Int5 along with the document reviews have also given that there were different reasons for the failures of reform initiatives: 1) Lack of instructional and authentically engaged leadership-not owning and supporting reform initiatives, 2) lack of flexibility; 3) loose resilience; 4) lack of depth, intensity, and inclusiveness; 5) rubber stamping sort of governing board; 6) lack of appropriate data; 7) not involving all communities of the institution; 8) lack of aligning budget allocation with the mission; 9) overly and ineffective communication; 10) lack of capacity building strategies and actions; 11) lack of coherence; and 12) low communality of purpose among different stakeholders.

As learnt from document review and from the interviews, the much top-down acclaimed initiatives lacked clarity and specificity to the respective HEIs' environments. For instance, the BPR design at AAU lacked clarity of line of accountability, alignment with stakeholders' expectations, and a well-defined overall work plan which could be easy for anyone to follow during the implementation phase. This shows that the top-down initiatives to reform Ethiopian HES were more centrally driven and failed in most cases and did not add value to enhance the HEIs' functions.

As the World Bank report indicates, the top-down exercise of state authority in the governance of African universities did not improve their quality, as they were

> …not always done in support of quality. Indeed, in some cases, the increased role of the state in university education contributed to a decline in the quality of higher education as a desire for political control of education; appointments to management and governing bodies were made largely on political rather than on merit basis. (Materu, 2007 p. xvi, cited in Varghese, 2015:75).

Int5 also had the view that the reform efforts in Ethiopian HEIs were in most cases fixations of the existing system rather than basing on the very assumptions and functions of the HEIs. In relation to this, Keiffenheim (2022:2) indicates that many reforms failed since they focused on changing "the visible, lower-leverage elements of a HE system (resource flows, regulations, metrics) without changing the invisible factors such as the purpose (mind-sets, goals, beliefs, and values), and without considering the interrelations of system components".

Int4 also indicated that some of the reforms were on singular elements, quantitative, and physical issues like facilities, learning and teaching materials, instructors' recruitment and training. These, nonetheless, were just surface symptoms, and did not lead to system thinking. A lack of system thinking often leads to false consciousness about the cause (Keiffenheim, 2022).

As the same source (p.2) further indicates, HE Programmes that fix singular elements might improve some learning outcomes, but without considering the wider system, they are likely doomed to fail. In the Ethiopian context, the practices of reform rely on tackling individual problems, such as trying to improve administrative setup, updating curricula, reworking bylaws, training staff, and fulfilling infrastructure along with GEQUIP, BPR, BSC, etc. none of which produced sustainable fruits. Int1 also had the view that the Ethiopian HES was, in most cases, full of unfit, uncommitted, unmotivated, and unenlightened workforce and leaders who hardly contribute to the success of reform initiatives. Unsuccessful reform initiatives in Ethiopian context have resulted in undifferentiated degrees across universities, lack of empowering universities, mushrooming hopelessness, quantitative targets/gains at the expense of quality, harmonization of core programs disregarding the uniqueness of HE environments and assigning students to where and what they wouldn't like to and focusing on excessively communication rather than systemic and systematic implementation.

Feasible Ways of Transforming the HE System

There are pragmatic ways of transforming the HES following realistic approaches that enable HEIs to operate flexibly and resiliently in the long term, to move to sustainable/lasting system change, not to misuse reform to delay transformation, to increase accountability, to tackle new challenges, ensure productivity and wise management, to protect consumers/clients'/ stakeholders, and to establishing quality culture at the HEIs.

Int2 indicated that one way of transforming the HES is by going "… beyond surface level, piecemeal and top-down reform initiatives, which are more of fixations of the existing system in Ethiopian context". HEIs are expected to tackle periodic and piecemeal top-down initiatives, short-term runs, narrow goals, and politically motivated reform initiatives that do not warranty long-term makeover of the HES as they are just small part of the problem, i.e. "the tip of the iceberg" (Keiffenheim, 2022:1).

Transforming the HES also demands the HEIs to operate flexibly and resiliently, and to emerge on a stronger footing from obstructions and moving to sustainable system change (Bogg et al., 2021). Keiffenheim (2022:2) has also argued that "[e]ducation transformation that leads to sustainable system change (not a better candle, but a light bulb) needs to understand, address, and be coherent about the system's structures". Citing Dr. Teresa Torzicky from the Innovation Foundation for Education, Keiffenheim (2022:1) rationalized the case that "[a] candle cannot become a light bulb through many improvements". Though both reform and transformation are needed, "we can't misuse reform to delay transformation. Instead, we must collectively co-define and build upon new purpose(s) for education while improving the existing system" (Ibid).

For Bogg et al. (2021:3), a transformation which brings a lasting change "requires an intense, operations-wide program focused on improving student outcomes and boosting organizational health and performance". Based on their experiences, Bogg et al. (2021:5) have identified "five common features of the most successful transformation efforts", namely, ensuring and building leadership engagement, board prioritization of transformation, financial outcomes' alignment with the institution's mission, comprehensive approach, and muscle for change. These are not only transformation efforts, but also inspiring, proving and are essential for the long-term success of the HEIs involved themselves.

Related to these, Int1 had the view that active leadership engagement, empowerment, commitment, and ownership of the change agendas are crucial for HEIs' successes in their transformation endeavors. In underscoring the importance of ensuring leadership engagement and empowerment to support the organization to reach its full potential, Bogg et al. (2021:5) indicate that: "[t]he best predictor of the success of a transformation is leadership that is willing to embrace new and innovative approaches, recognizes the importance of institutional performance and health, and is prepared to take a self-confident leap instead of incremental steps. A few actions can help core decision makers ensure leadership is on board".

In further detailing leadership engagement and empowerment to support the organization to reach its full potential, it is advisable: 1) to develop an aspirational shared vision; 2) to establish a data-driven organizational baseline; 3) to create a sense of urgency; and 4) getting everyone involved (Bogg et al., 2021).

In highlighting the importance of ensuring the board's prioritization of the transformation Bogg et al. (2021) advise that the core decision makers should consider involving the board in three ways, namely: 1) leveraging the board's advisory/governing role and fiduciary duties; 2) building in accountability; and 3) ensuring the board is grounded in the current HE trends.

Bogg et al. (2021:8) further espouses for translating "financial outcomes to the institution's mission when setting transformation targets" by taking two related actions, namely, 1) emphasizing mission impact over fiscal impact in messaging to the campus, and 2)

communicating small but impactful vignettes.

Moreover, in promoting the view that taking a comprehensive approach across both growth and efficiencies, Bogg et al. (2021:10) further indicate that "… targeting strategic growth can expand the impact of an institution's mission and establish a more financially resilient university" by way of: 1) reviewing student outcomes and revenue generating and operating activities, and 2) ensuring the message to the community focuses on strategic growth ambitions as well as efficiency.

Finally, in accentuating the need for building "muscle for change", Bogg et al. (2021:7) espouse for: 1) establishing a central transformation team; 2) detailing a transparent and objective decision-making process, and 3) improving organizational capabilities: invest in growing individual and collective capacity through dedicated training aimed at expanding the talent bench and ensuring the longevity of the transformation.

Above all, success in HE transformation demands ensuring proper governance as it: 1) encompasses authoritative decision making structures, relationships, and processes across issues that are significant for external as well as internal stakeholders; and 2) has the attributes of accountability and multiple traits and complex webs affecting institutions, individuals and collective actors, sections and elements (Othman, & Mukandala, 1994, cited in Igweta, et al., 2022; Hénard & Mitterle, 2010; Gayle, Tewarie and White, 2003; Varghese, 2009; Temple et al., 2013; Igweta et al., 2022).

In the Ethiopian context, university governance is run by the governing board, a President, vice presidents, etc. But the current trend following AAU's autonomy has brought positions of Chancellor [external], the vice-chancellor/president or chief executive officers (CEOs), and Deputy Vice-chancellors and many more.

Whatever the governance arrangement, an effective transformation demands going beneath the surface, and engaging in fundamental makeover, which questions the dominant logic of a system by revisiting its existing/current function/purpose of a specific HE from which everything else follows. HE system transformation should fit for the purpose the time demands. This calls for system and systematic transformation, a paradigm shifts rather than mere reform, which is in most cases piecemeal, incremental, repair, not transformative (Int5). There is a need to cause a fundamental change in the very purpose of the HES, approach or underlying educational assumptions by redefining and changing the HES's shared purpose, or multiple purposes, that are fit for our time and context and then redesigning all system parts to contribute to these new purposes. This calls for focusing on system-level change that endures over time by: 1) redefining the reason for the institutional existence (mission); 2) demarcating the aspiration of the institution in achieving its long term view (vision); 3) delineating the culture, core priorities and beliefs of the institution that are shared among its stakeholders (values); 4) looking the future in a systematic manner (strategic planning); 5) demarcating where the institution is now, and where it wants to be in the next five

or so years; 6) visualizing how big the gap between where the HEI is and where it wants to be; 7) preparing resources required to get where it wants to be; 8) devising how it could arrive at its destination (its plans, programs, projects, activities, etc.); and 9) evaluating the extent and/or whether it really arrives at its vision, mission and goals (Firdissa, 2008).

Overall, our time calls for revitalizing; redefining; and changing the invisible, the purpose- the mindset, goals, beliefs, and values by considering the interrelations of system components; considering the wider system in a way it ascertains quality, which is often easier said than done.

Conclusions and Implications

With the quest for transforming the Ethiopian HES by investigating the hitherto reform rationales and their failures, a qualitative approach was used to generate data from document

scrutiny and interviews. The fact that HEIs had introduced various reform initiatives to be centers of excellence along with their mandates, expectations, dynamisms, and to overcome challenges indicate that there are intuitive needs and rationales for that. Contrarily, nonetheless, many of the reforms failed before producing fruits due to unengaged and less empowered leadership- resulting in lack of shared vision, empowerment, ownership, commitment, and transparent and objective decision-making processes. Moreover, loose accountability, dogmatic institutional culture and deep-rooted status-quo, top-down and piecemeal reform initiatives, ad hoc and rubber stumping decisions, fragmentations, institutional fatigue, uninvolved mindset/ indecisiveness, loose alignment of financial outcomes to the core mission, and overly communication beyond achievements were the reasons for reform failures and at the same time rationales to instigate still another reform. Consequently, many of the HEIs were menaced with abortive reform jumbles that cannot liberate the System from its quagmire of inundated challenges and dogmatic cultures. In such a case, the HES can hardly transform public sectors to meet societal needs by providing better services, and by invigorating development endeavors along with the dynamisms. Transforming the public sector calls for first transforming the HES itself by going beyond the status quo and by doing different things along with the demands and the dynamisms.

The secretary-general of the UN, António Guterres, once asserted that "[w]we will not end this crisis by simply doing more of the same, faster or better. Now is the time to transform education systems" (UN, 202:2). In presumption, therefore, there is a need to tackle periodic and piecemeal top-down initiatives, short-term runs, narrow goals, and politically motivated reform initiatives that do not warranty long-term makeover of the HES as they are just small part of the problem, i.e. *the tip of the iceberg*. This calls for going beyond fire fitting, going beneath the surface, transforming the very assumption of the HES, building a culture of Indigenous Knowledge paradigm, and engaging in transformation, which questions the dominant logic of a system by revisiting its existing/current function/purpose of a specific HE from which everything else follows; and making the HE systems fit for the purpose of the public sectors and the demand of the day by paradigmatically transforming rather than focusing on mere reform, which is piecemeal, incremental, repair, not transformative.

To engage in public sector transformation, HEIs need to operate more compliantly, robustly and emerge on a sound foundation that relieves them from their predicament. This can be a reality when they work on systemic transformation by: going beyond surface symptoms, focusing on strategic issues, considering dynamism within the knowledge production and utilization, putting in place a culture of instructional leadership, instilling accountability, tackling emergent challenges, targeting productivity and managing it wisely, meeting stakeholders' expectations and protecting their interests, and making education quality part of the systemic and institutional strategic and transformative cultures.

Overall, the reform rationales include the HEIs' mandates, aspirations (commonly to be centers of excellence in their core functions), expectations; dynamism, challenges; and failed previous reforms. The causes for reform failures also include top-down initiatives; accountability and momentum loose; lack of instructional and unengaged leadership; undesirable institutional culture; piecemeal/surface symptoms; inconsequential board assignment; unaligned budget with mission; overly and ineffective communication; and just focusing on the visible ignoring the invisibles (mindsets, goals, beliefs, and values). There are also ways of transforming the HES by aligning transformation initiatives to mandates, aspirations, expectations, and dynamisms; overcoming challenges, approaching systemically; transforming the very assumption of the HE curriculum; and building a culture of Indigenous Knowledge paradigm.

Sustaining HES transformation calls for systemic and systematic transformative planning, implementation, monitoring and support; institutionalizing the HES transformation; enhancing ownership; instilling instructional leadership; and enforcing autonomy with accountability.

Reform failures were the major causes still for other reform initiatives, and reform rationales

also may affect reform failures positively or negatively. Whereas well planned and implemented reform rationales minimize the causes for the failures, the reverse is also true to aggravate the failures. On the other hand, the causes for reform failures and HES transformation have reciprocal influences on each other as the causes downsize the extent of the HES transformation, and equally in opposite direction well done HES transformation minimizes the effects of the failures.

Moreover, there are equal and positive effects between HES transformation and sustaining it. Whereas well planned and implemented HES transformation guarantees sustaining the transformation, sustained HES transformation also further transforms the HES along with the demands and the dynamisms. The transformed HES, therefore, should be sustained through systemic and systematic transformative planning, implementation, monitoring and supporting. The interplays among the variables call for; 1) going beyond surface symptoms and causing a fundamental change in the very purposes, values, assumptions, and quality culture of the HES; 2) focusing on strategic issues, on mission, on vision, and on core values and considering their dynamisms along with time, space, environment, development, and unpredictability; and 3) putting in place systems thinking by visualizing and realizing the HES as a whole and its interactive constituent parts wherein public sector transformation is goof-proofed. The results imply that transforming the public sector calls for revitalizing the mind-sets and systemically transforming the very assumptions of the HES by:

1)   delivering transformative outcomes wherein research, teaching, and services are directed to societal needs.
2)   linking the HES to regional development endeavors, cognizant of the current Ethiopian Federal arrangements.
3)   reconsidering the way governing Board, and students are assigned to universities.
4)   putting in place systemic and systematic strategies to guarantee the qualities of HE functions.
5)   boosting staff and leadership understanding and commitment towards transformation.
6)   building HES on a sound foundation of high-quality, equity, networking, and responsive to Indigenous knowledge systems, work, life, and labor market demands; and
7)   making HEIs agents of transformative changes owned by their communities.

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