

A Study of Cultural Competence and Ethnic-Based Bias among Ethiopian Higher Education Instructors

Sonan Daniel ¹, and Zerihun Doda²

Abstract

This study was undertaken with the aim of exploring the state of cultural competence and ethnic-based biases among the faculty and students of two selected public universities in Ethiopia, namely, Addis Ababa University and Wolaita Sodo University. The study employed a mixed-methods design, with a concurrent collection of field data using surveys of the faculty and undergraduate students in their second year and above at the time of the fieldwork. The faculty and the students were randomly selected, with a purposeful focus on certain colleges and campuses at both universities. Much of the data was collected using quantitative surveys. Qualitative data collected through interviewing faculty officers, student representatives, and other relevant stakeholders in academic administration supported the survey. The data were analyzed using appropriate tools, including SPSS for the surveys and MAXQDA 2022 for the qualitative data. The findings overall indicate that faculty self-ratings yielded a positive assessment on the measurement items, while student reports indicated instances of biases based on ethnicity interfering with academic duties. Both universities lacked robust policy and guidelines on the management of diversity and dealing with bias arising from a lack of cultural competence and ethnic-based biases. The study concludes that a positive learning environment cannot be realized without appropriate cultural competence among the faculty. The study recommends appropriate sensitivity and competence training, clear policies for reporting and managing biases, and integrating cultural diversity into the curriculum. These can help in enhancing inclusivity on campus, fighting against ethnic-based biases, and promoting peaceful coexistence among the university community.

Keywords: Cultural competence, ethnic bias, higher education, inclusivity

¹: Lecturer, Ethiopian Civil Service University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Email: mayat916@gmail.com

²: PhD, Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Ethiopian Civil Service University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Email: doffanaz@gmail.com

Background and Introduction

Introduction

Our world forms diverse populations defined by language, culture, ethnicity, race, and religion. This diversity is not evenly distributed; European and Northeast Asian countries tend to be more homogeneous, while Sub-Saharan Africa is notably diverse. Papua New Guinea ranks as the most linguistically and ethnically diverse country, with around 840 languages spoken, in contrast to Argentina, Comoros, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Rwanda, and Uruguay, which are among the least culturally diverse countries (Ang, 2021).

Like many Sub-Saharan African nations, Ethiopia is a federation of various ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional minorities. The Ethiopian census finds over 90 ethnic groups and more than 80 spoken languages, with the highest diversity found in southwestern Ethiopia (World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples, 2023).

Diversity is often described as a double-edged sword, capable of driving development, as seen in the United States, or fostering unrest, as shown in regions like the Balkans, Rwanda, and Iraq (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017; Phillips, 2014). Scholars (Goeren, 2013; Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005; Wang, 2022) suggest that ethnic diversity can hinder economic and political progress, leading to unrest and civil war, deterring investment. Conversely, Gatykaev & Voronetsky (2018) found that cultural diversity positively affects GDP growth over time. Bove and Elia (2016) also argued that diversity fuels technological innovation and diverse production. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2001) affirms that cultural diversity fosters exchange, innovation, and creativity, essential to humanity's survival. The effects of diversity hinge on how differences are managed. Without mutual respect for ethno-cultural and religious identities, the potential benefits of diversity may go unrealized.

Cultural competence is a vital tool for fostering coexistence among diverse ethnic backgrounds. Defined as the congruence of behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, and policies that enable effective cross-cultural interaction (Jongen et al., 2017), cultural competence in education emphasizes students' cultural knowledge and experiences to promote fair and inclusive teaching (Hamdan & Coloma, 2022). Cultural competence is essential in shared spaces such as public institutions, schools, and hospitals. According to Snyder and Hoffman (2016), higher education exemplifies diversity, as universities increasingly host culturally diverse students and faculty (Tamtik, 2022). Global demographic shifts and immigration patterns present opportunities for diverse educational environments (Smith, 2015).

UNESCO emphasizes that well-managed diversity in universities enhances personal development, fosters economic, technological, and social change, and equips students with skills for evolving labor markets (UNESCO, 2023). In Ethiopia, public institutions, especially universities, highlight significant diversity. Over the past two decades, Ethiopian universities have increasingly embraced diversity, reflected in their institutional principles (Adamu, 2022). However, these institutions struggle to protect students from ethnic and religious clashes. Faculty members often engage in political activism, worsening tensions through social media rather than modeling respect for diversity and human rights. This study explores faculty cultural competence and any ethnocentric biases toward students.

Statement of the Problem

Diversity issues in higher education encompass challenges related to ethnic and cultural differences, racism, gender discrimination, disabilities, sexual orientation, political beliefs, religious beliefs, age, and socioeconomic status (Gasman, 2010; Walls, 2021). As Gurin et al. (2007) noted, diversity plays a crucial role in personal development, particularly during college years when individuals define their identities and social roles. Research on diversity in higher education is expanding globally, although studies differ between developed countries and Ethiopia. Research in developed nations examines a range of diversity factors, while Ethiopian studies primarily focus on ethno-cultural and religious differences among students. Additionally, research in developed countries highlights the educational benefits of diversity, while Ethiopian studies emphasize ethnic conflict and management.

Embracing diversity is essential for success in a pluralistic, interconnected world. Increased

diversity in higher education can improve intergroup relations, campus climate, and access to support systems, fostering broader perspectives and complex discussions (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Smith, 2015). Diversity enhances learning environments, cultural competency, opportunities for minority students, and empowering historically underrepresented communities (Diversity in Higher Education, 2021). Numerous studies (Kamola, 2022; Saba et al., 2021; Coggins & Campbell, 2008) highlight the benefits of diversity for innovation and learning.

Research (see for example, Clarke & Antonio, 2012; Gurin et al., 2002; Smith & Schonfeld, 2000) has found positive effects of diversity in universities, while others (Chang et al., 2006; Marin, 2000; Milem, 2003) focused on educational benefits. Studies by Haddad et al. (2021), Karlsson et al. (2019), Luiz & Mariotti (2011), and Qian (2013) link diversity to innovation and entrepreneurship, suggesting that diverse teams foster creativity and problem-solving. While researchers agree on the benefits of diversity, they also emphasize the importance of effective management to achieve these advantages. Sobel et al. (2010) illustrate that in well-managed institutions; diversity fosters economic progress through the exchange and competition of ideas. Thus, in universities where ethnic diversity is effectively managed, positive outcomes prevail, leading to economic growth and innovation. Conversely, poorly managed diversity can result in negative consequences.

Despite its potential, diversity can also lead to prejudice and discrimination. One significant challenge facing universities globally is ethnocentrism towards ethnic minorities. Numerous studies (Gittoes & Thompson, 2007; Henry & Tator, 2009; Russell, 2023; Sian, 2019) have examined this issue. Researchers (Beattie et al., 2013; Huston, 2005) argue that diversity can cause suffering for minority groups, and teachers' biases towards students have been investigated (Kuntarto et al., 2019; Santiago, n.d.; Warikoo et al., 2016) in relation to religion and ethnicity. Gender and socioeconomic biases have also been studied (Albaghli et al., 2022; Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009; Prince & Franklin-Corben, 2022), with research demonstrating how ethnic-based biases affect academic achievement (Engberg, 2004; Costa et al., 2022; Glock et al., 2022). Boudreau (2020) found that teachers' implicit biases can lead to unequal student outcomes.

Research shows that proper diversity management can mitigate these negative impacts through initiatives like diversity training, mentoring programs, and increased faculty diversity (Tienda, 2013; Whittaker & Montgomery, 2014). Faculty must have high cultural competence to ease effective teaching and learning. Diverse faculty has been shown to alleviate ethnic tensions among students (Lee, 2002; Mohamad, 2016; Sorensen & Maxwell, 2009). As Brown (2004) asserts, higher education institutions have a responsibility to lead in this critical area, preparing individuals for a diverse population and workforce.

Unfortunately, Ethiopian institutions struggle with faculty diversity, as many faculty members have moved to universities closer to their ethnic communities. Adamu notes that since the 2018 change in government, ethnic tensions have worsened staff transfers, with faculty members seeking to work in regions aligned with their ethnic groups, reducing overall faculty diversity and potentially harming campus inclusivity (Adamu, 2022).

In addition to being hubs of knowledge, Ethiopian universities are also places of political rivalry, where people have historically died because of their ethnicity (Adamu, 2014; Ashine, 2019; Zekarias, 2020). According to Adamu's research, things have gotten worse since 2005, with student

conflicts and ethnic tensions rising.

Diversity issues in Ethiopian higher education are the subject of numerous studies. For example, Adamu (2018) concentrated on diversity at Bahir Dar University, while Zekarias (2020) studied ethnic-based conflicts at Debre Berhan University. Other studies looked at the effects of stereotypes on cross-cultural relationships (Mekonnen, 2013) and ethnocentrism and peer preferences (Gebbru, 2012). The difficulties of handling ethnic diversity in public universities were examined by Adamu (2022). As opposed to research that focuses on students, Gutu & Tegegne (2023) evaluated the intercultural sensitivity of instructors, while Amsale et al. (2016) and Amsale & Geleta (2016) examined the multicultural competencies of educational leaders in a few Ethiopian universities. These studies show that instructors and leaders in higher education lack cultural competency, but little is known about how this affects students.

Many Ethiopian academics today take part in political activism and display ethnocentric views. According to Birhane (2019), some academics use social media to voice politically motivated and ethnically charged views, often directed at students and coworkers from diverse backgrounds. It is difficult to expect these educators to keep cultural competency or act as positive role models given the divisive narratives they propagate, which could worsen ethnic tensions within their institutions. Studies on higher education's cultural competency

There is a lack of faculty, and when there is, it often ignores how it affects interactions between instructors and diverse students as well as teaching procedures. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate faculty cultural competence and any implicit biases against students from varying ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Research Objectives

General Objective

The main aim of this study was to investigate faculty cultural competency and find any ethnic biases against students at Addis Ababa University and Wolaita Sodo University.

Specific Objectives

- 1 To decide whether students' feelings of faculty cultural competence align with faculty self-assessments in Ethiopian higher education institutions.
- 2 To examine if instructors in Ethiopian higher education institutions hold implicit biases against students based on ethnic or religious backgrounds.

Research Methodology

Study Area

The research was carried out at Wolaita Sodo University and Addis Ababa University. These universities were picked because of their varied methods, assets, and locations, which provide information about the condition of higher education in Ethiopia.

Research Approach and Design

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the study's mixed-methods approach. While faculty and official interviews and open-ended survey responses provided qualitative data, student and instructor surveys provided quantitative data.

A purposive sampling strategy selected Addis Ababa University and Wolaita Sodo University, being first-generation and third-generation public universities in Ethiopia, respectively. Further purposive sampling chose colleges of social sciences, natural sciences, education and humanities, health and medicine, and business and economics. Participants included second-year and above students and faculty members. Due to challenges in obtaining correct population size information, a sample size of 384 for each category was proportionally divided between the two universities. High non-response rates and survey fatigue among faculty led to using availability and willingness criteria for survey participation.

Data Analysis

For quantitative data, mean comparison analysis was used to compare faculty self-ratings and student ratings of faculty cultural competence. The data comes from responses of a total of 195 faculty respondents taking part in the survey: 84 (43.1%) from Addis Ababa University and 111 (56.9%) from Wolaita Sodo University and 376 students, 192 (51.1%) from Wolaita Sodo University and 184 (48.9%) from Addis Ababa University.

Qualitative data were derived from key informant interviews and open-ended survey responses, transcribed, and entered an Excel template for clarity, consistency, and completeness. Thematic analysis, eased by MAXqda 2024 and ChatGPT, was employed to find key concepts and themes. A total of 9 officers from various departments at Wolaita Sodo University and 4 officers from the College of Social Sciences at Addis Ababa University were interviewed. From the surveys, 90 relevant responses from officers and 110 student responses (28% of the total) to open-ended questions were analyzed.

Ethical Consideration

This study ensured ethical compliance through ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the non-disclosure of true identities, with no potential harm or benefit from taking part in the research.

Results

Description of Study Participants

This study used a mixed methods approach to examine cultural competence and ethnic bias among faculty and students at Addis Ababa and Wolaita Sodo Universities. Quantitative data was collected through surveys, while qualitative insights were obtained from interviews and open-ended survey responses. Both sets of data are integrated below under thematic headings.

The quantitative study involved 195 faculty members and 376 students from Addis Ababa University (AAU) and Wolaita Sodo University (WSU). Most faculty respondents were aged 31-

40, and most had 6-20 years of teaching experience. The majority were male, and many held master's degrees.

Table 1. Background Information of Instructors, Instructor Ethnic Bias Survey, 2024

		N	Percentage
Name of the University	WSU	111	56.90%
	AAU	84	43.10%
Age of Respondent	21-30	27	13.80%
	31-40	69	35.40%
	41-50	56	28.70%
	51-60	20	10.30%
	61-70	20	10.30%
	Missing	3	1.50%
Work Experience	0-5	31	15.90%
	6-12	47	24.10%
	13-20	54	27.70%
	Above 20	28	14.40%
	Missing	12	6.20%
Sex of Respondent	Male	148	75.90%
	Female	29	14.90%
Education Status	Not Given	17	8.70%
	Bachelor's Degree	13	6.70%
	Master's Degree	95	48.70%
	PhD Degree	63	32.30%
	Other	3	1.50%
	Missing	2	1.00%

Source: Own Survey _____

The survey included 376 students, 192 (51.1%) from Wolaita Sodo University and 184 (48.9%) from Addis Ababa University. Most participants (57.4%) were in their third year of study. Age distribution showed 60.4% were 21-25 years, 27.7% were 18-20 years, 5.9% were 26-30 years, and 2.9% were 30 years or older. Gender distribution was 66.5% male and 31.9% female.

Table 2: Background Information of Students, Instructor Ethnic Bias Survey, 2024

Variable	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
University				
WSU	192	51.1%	51.1%	51.1%
AAU	184	48.9%	48.9%	100%
Total	376	100%	100%	
Year Level				
2nd Year	74	19.7%	19.7%	19.7%
3rd Year	216	57.4%	57.4%	77.1%
4th Year	28	7.4%	7.4%	84.6%
5th Year	4	1.1%	1.1%	85.6%
Not Given	54	14.4%	14.4%	100%
Total	376	100%	100%	
Age				
18-20	104	27.7%	27.7%	27.7%
21-25	227	60.4%	60.4%	88%
26-30	22	5.9%	5.9%	93.9%
30 & above	11	2.9%	2.9%	96.8%
Not Given	12	3.2%	3.2%	100%
Total	376	100%	100%	
Sex				
Male	250	66.5%	66.5%	66.5%
Female	120	31.9%	31.9%	98.4%
Not Given	5	1.3%	1.3%	99.7%
Other	1	0.3%	0.3%	100%
Total	376	100%	100%	

In the qualitative part of the research, 56 % of the faculty informants were sourced from Wolayta Soddo University (WSU) and the rest (44%) from Addis Ababa University (AAU). Close to 68% of the faculty informants were from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (variation in college names adjusted across the university to the study purpose). Faculty Informants further hailed from colleges of Education and Behavioral Sciences (about 13%), College of Health Sciences (8%), and Medicine, Engineering (4.9%), Agriculture and FBE (2.94%).

Across the colleges, a total of close to 30 departments were involved constructing our instructor informants, the notable ones being Sociology, Anthropology, Geography and Environmental Studies, History and Heritage Management, English Language and Literature, among others. Female respondents accounted for close to 9%, while 87% were males, the rest declined to report their sexes.

A total of 107 students responded to the qualitative question items, with 56% from Addis Ababa University (AAU) and 44% from Wolayta Sodo University (WSU). About 74% were affiliated with the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 14% with the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE), and the remaining 12% with the College of Law and Governance, the College of Computational and Natural Sciences, and the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences. The gender distribution was 71% male and 29% female. In terms of religion, 45% were Protestant,

30% Ethiopian Orthodox, 14% Muslim, 6% Catholic, and 6% chose not to show. Most respondents (59%) were aged 21-25, 27% were 18-20, and 7% were 26-30. About academic year, 60% were third-year students, 23% second-year, 6% fourth-year, 1% fifth year, and 10% did not specify.

Key Findings of the Study

Teachers' and Students' Perception of Teachers' Cultural Competence

This study aimed to understand students' views on their lecturers' cultural competence and how lecturers perceive their own cultural competence. The survey questions were divided into four themes: fairness and equality, inclusivity and respect for diversity, conflict prevention and ethical conduct, and reporting and social responsibility.

Equality and Fairness in Treatment

Both teachers and students responded to five questions assessing feelings of fairness and equality. The mean scores for each group were calculated and compared.

Table 3: Teachers' Self-Ratings of Equality and Fairness in Treatment

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interactions	195	4.16	1.089
Equality	193	4.40	1.001
Negative Examples	194	4.05	1.188
Superiority	194	4.00	1.335
Assumptions	194	3.99	1.147

Source: Own Survey

Teachers rated themselves highly for positive interactions with students ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.089$), showing they view these interactions as fair and respectful across ethnic backgrounds. They also scored high on equality ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.001$), reflecting a commitment to treating all students equally. Additionally, they rated themselves moderately on avoiding negative examples in teaching ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.188$) and feelings of superiority ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.335$), suggesting mindfulness about biases. Lastly, their self-rating on assumptions ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.147$) shows some awareness of fair grading practices across different ethnicities.

Table 4: Students' Ratings of Equality and Fairness in Treatment

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Satisfied Interaction	374	3.74	1.302
Discrimination	374	2.30	1.234
Negative Examples	374	2.49	1.249
Ethnic Superiority	372	2.42	1.196
Mistaken Assumptions	374	2.37	1.251

Source: Own Survey

Students reported a mean satisfaction rating of 3.74 (SD = 1.302), showing moderate satisfaction with their interactions with teachers. They perceived a low level of discrimination (M = 2.30, SD = 1.234) and moderate instances of negative examples (M = 2.49, SD = 1.249) in these interactions. Feelings of ethnic superiority were also low (M = 2.42, SD = 1.196), as were feelings of mistaken assumptions (M = 2.37, SD = 1.251) about their interactions with teachers.

Inclusivity and Respect for Diversity

Teachers and students assessed inclusivity and respect for diversity through five questions.

Table 5: Teachers' Self-Ratings of Inclusivity and Respect for Diversity

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Grading	194	4.14	1.101
Diverse Perspectives	194	3.96	1.062
Conflict Prevention	192	4.24	3.677
Cultural Respect	194	4.16	2.274
Cultural Attire Comfort	194	3.65	1.255

Teachers rated themselves on five aspects of inclusivity and respect for diversity, including their interactions with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds and their comfort with cultural attire and language use in the classroom. The mean ratings were as follows: Grading (M = 4.14, SD = 1.101), Diverse Perspectives (M = 3.96, SD = 1.062), Conflict Prevention (M = 4.24, SD = 3.677), Cultural Respect (M = 4.16, SD = 2.274), and Cultural Attire (M = 3.65, SD = 1.255).

These results show that teachers perceive themselves positively about grading practices, conflict prevention strategies, and cultural respect. However, there is room for improvement in promoting diverse perspectives and acknowledging cultural attire.

Table 6: Students' Ratings of Inclusivity and Respect for Diversity

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Impartial Grading	371	3.09	1.260
Diverse Perspectives	373	3.08	1.243
Conflict Prevention	369	3.59	4.424
Cultural Respect	370	3.29	1.337
Cultural Attire Comfort	373	2.53	1.245

Source: Own Survey

The mean ratings for the dimensions varied from 2.53 to 3.59. Students rated their teachers highest in Conflict Prevention (M = 3.59, SD = 4.424), followed by Cultural Respect (M = 3.29, SD = 1.337), Impartial Grading (M = 3.09, SD = 1.260), Diverse Perspectives (M = 3.08, SD = 1.243), and Cultural Attire Comfort (M = 2.53, SD = 1.245). Overall, students had a positive feeling from their teachers about inclusivity and respect for diversity, with the highest rating in Conflict

Prevention.

Conflict Prevention and Ethical Conduct

Teachers and students evaluated conflict prevention and ethical conduct through five questions. They rated themselves on five statements about their practices. These included taking proactive measures against ethnic conflict, refraining from spreading rumors, avoiding biased opinions during conflicts, treating students equally during recent conflicts, and avoiding biased discussions on current and historical issues.

The results, summarized in the table below, show that teachers rate themselves highly in these areas, showing active engagement in practices to prevent conflicts, address biases, avoid ethnic mistreatment, report incidents, and help unbiased classroom discussions.

Table 7: Teachers' Self-Ratings of Conflict Prevention and Ethical Conduct

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Rumors	195	3.79	1.308
Bias in Conflicts	194	3.93	1.192
Ethnic Mistreatment	195	4.05	1.174
Reporting Mistreatment	192	3.91	1.140
Biased Discussions	194	3.80	1.285

Source: Own Survey

Teachers reported elevated levels of conflict prevention and ethical conduct, with mean scores ranging from 3.79 to 4.05.

Table 8: Students' Ratings of Conflict Prevention and Ethical Conduct

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Rumor Spreading	363	2.34	1.323
Biased Opinions	371	2.34	1.281
Ethnic Targeting	374	2.31	1.260
Complaint Confidence	372	3.18	2.080
Unbiased Discussions	368	3.15	1.391

Source: Own Survey

Students assessed their teachers' cultural competence through five questions about cultural sensitivity and classroom behavior, focusing on proactive conflict prevention, avoiding rumor-spreading, expressing unbiased opinions, treating students fairly during conflicts, and refraining from biased discussions.

The results showed that students perceived a moderate level of effort from teachers in these areas. Specifically, rumor-spreading, and biased opinions both received a mean score of 2.34 (SD = 1.323 and SD = 1.281, respectively), suggesting some perceived level of bias. For ethnic targeting, the mean score was 2.31 (SD = 1.260), showing instances of perceived ethnic bias.

In terms of addressing complaints, teachers were rated higher with a mean of 3.18 (SD = 0.080), reflecting varied feelings of confidence in handling issues. Finally, to help with unbiased discussions, students rated their teachers at 3.15 (SD = 1.391), showing moderate effectiveness in this regard.

Reporting and Social Responsibility

Teachers and students evaluated reporting and social responsibility through three questions.

Table 9: Teachers' Self-Ratings of Reporting and Social Responsibility

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ethnic Language Freedom	195	3.53	1.277
Social Media Criticism	194	3.89	1.275
Ethnic Preference	189	4.07	1.194

Source: Own Survey

Teachers assessed their own efforts in reporting and social responsibility in a diverse university setting through three questions. The mean scores were as follows: Ethnic Language Freedom (M = 3.53, SD = 1.277), Social Media Criticism (M = 3.89, SD = 1.275), and Ethnic Preference (M = 4.07, SD = 1.194).

These results show that teachers perceive their efforts in promoting ethnic language freedom as moderate, handling social media criticism as relatively high, and addressing ethnic preference as even higher. Overall, teachers feel they are making reasonable strides in fulfilling their reporting responsibilities while instructing diverse students.

Table 10: Students' Ratings of Reporting and Social Responsibility

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ethnic Language Freedom	374	3.07	1.330
Social Media Criticism	374	2.50	1.266
Ethnic Preference	373	2.78	1.329

Source: Own Survey

To evaluate students' perceptions of their teachers' efforts in Reporting and Social Responsibility in a university setting, related questions were posed. Results showed that students perceive a moderate level of effort in addressing Ethnic Language Freedom (M = 3.07, SD = 1.330). However, they rated the effort about Social Media Criticism lower (M = 2.50, SD = 1.266), showing less perceived engagement from teachers in this area. For Ethnic Preference, students again reported a moderate level of effort (M = 2.78, SD = 1.329) from their teachers.

Qualitative Insights into Cultural Diversity Awareness

Both instructors and students from various Ethiopian public universities proved an acute awareness of the ethnic diversity present on their campuses. Instructors widely acknowledged the diversity of the university environment, with one from Wolayta Sodo University (WSU) noting, "Our university serves all Ethiopian citizens; it calls itself 'mini-Ethiopia'." This sentiment was echoed

by another instructor who remarked, “The instructors themselves come from different backgrounds, so they know it.” Such awareness among the academic staff suggests a foundational understanding of the diverse cultural make-up within the universities.

However, both groups recognized that significant barriers remain in achieving true inclusivity. While diversity was clear, instructors observed that their responses varied. An instructor told that although the faculty are aware of multi-cultural issues, they neglect such matters in practice when they teach in classrooms. This demonstrates that although in theory diversity is acknowledged, a culturally responsive pedagogy is not practiced.

Similar feedback was reported by students. Some have declared that they had not had personal experience of ethnic based discrimination against their academic rights on the campus. However, some reported increasing incidence of ethnic discrimination on campus. There was, in general, an appreciation of diversity on the campuses, but their management was not found to be effective. Students’ reports show although there seems to be inclusive practices, such practices do not benefit all students equally.

Cultural diversity was recognized in the two universities. However, surveyed faculty members reported ethnic based discrimination persists in nuanced ways. One faculty member said, “we hear rumors that some teachers favor their fellow ethnic member students in grading.” On the hand, faculty members also report encouraging condition of diversity appreciation, as corroborated by an instructor from Wolyata Sodo University: “Our University is a hub for academic community from the multi-cultural groups and students form different ethnic groups coexist peacefully.” This shows both positive interactions and concerning incidence of ethnic based arises, calling for a wise handling of managing diversity.

Talking about the apparent discrimination based on ethnicity, some students at Wolyata Sodo University reported that discrimination at the university seem to be institutionalized, noting that the instructors fared better compared to the University as an organization in this regard. SO, the problem was more than personal biases of individual faculty members. The administration seems more biased. So, the problem needs to be investigated not just in classrooms alone but in the whole organizational culture and administrative procedures.

A common manifestation of ethnic-based biases and lack of cultural competence among the faculty was voiced by both the teachers and students was linguistic bias. Although not necessarily an outright bias, teachers often found themselves unable to treat students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds other than their own. Instructors noted that their fellow staff members often find it difficult to engage with students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, demonstrating that they lacked appropriate cultural awareness and competency. The surveyed students similarly voiced their concern that linguistic barriers often heightened their sense of exclusion and that some teachers preferred to communicate with students in their local languages. Although this is not a discriminatory practice, it creates an unnecessary sense of exclusion among students who do not share the local language.

Our survey measurement tool included items on existing institutional responses and initiative regarding cultural competence and ethnic-based biases. A common observation reported by both the faculty and students at both universities was the existence of some initiative and institutional

programs that were installed to deal with issues of promoting diversity and containing biases and discrimination. It was reported that both universities upheld diversity as a core value of their universities including in their strategic documents. It was reported that various activities, events, and programs existed that meant to promote inclusiveness and peaceful co-existence and that awareness training was provided to enhance open dialogue.

However, in both universities, the actual, practical implementation of various initiatives was not undertaken in a consistent and sustainable manner. Instructors noted that although there are some good policies, they are not often translated into actual, useful practices due to lack of seriousness, adequate resource support, and leadership commitment. Some students, while acknowledging the existence of the policies, expressed their concerns that in most cases the policies were just on paper. A student at AAU noted that the University should organize cultural diversity awareness and competent training for the faculty and students regularly, not just as campaigns for some cultural events. Further, both students and faculty expressed their views that the Universities should engage in continuous and sustained schemes to promote cultural exchanges among the university community through arranging regular events in which students from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds may showcase their cultural identities so that diversities are celebrated. An instructor from AAU noted that such cultural exchange programs might help break the barriers and enhance positive mutual understanding among students from various backgrounds.

Open ended survey questions as well as interview items touched on the issue of what needs to be done to combat the problem of what the faculty and the students reported in their views, observations, and experiences as cultural competency and ethnic -bias problems affecting the academic environment. Both the instructors and students emphasized the need for sustained practical oriented training on awareness for both the faculty and students. One teacher noted, "More and more awareness training should plan and executed on ow to apply cultural competence I in the classroom settings. Another instructor noted that cultural competence among teachers is not alone time lesson; it requires consistent and ongoing capacity development efforts through regular dialogues and training workshops.

Both the students and teachers further expressed their views that there was a stronger need for a practical, firmer, and institutional systems with the necessary muscle power and resources to really combat the problem of cultural competence and ethnic-based biases in the campuses. Universities should not just design policies; they should see to it that the policies really touch the ground in practical ways. One instructor said that the Universities should promote systems for the campus community in general and the students in particular ways in which the incidences of biases and discriminations in academic practices are reported to the university authorities who in turn must take firm and transparent actions against all such discriminations. Teachers further noted that cultural diversity matters should be well integrated into classroom settings, and more courses should include these in their curriculum. The contents should reflect Ethiopian society's diversity so that "so students can learn about each other in an academic context,"

Discussion

From the foregoing presentation of the key findings, it is interesting to underscore that there is a well-developed awareness and appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity, and the fact that

Ethiopia as a home for all peoples from the diverse backgrounds is so much demonstrated in the rich diversity of life in the public university campuses. There is a general understanding among the surveyed instructors and students regarding the need for instructor's cultural competency and the fact that students should not be exposed to ethnic biased practices in academic practices in general and instructors' respect for cultural sensitivity and avoidance of ethnic bias in classroom settings, in pedagogical practices and in evaluation of students' academic performances.

As to the way both students and teachers perceived instructors' cultural competence, the findings showed that teachers self-rated in a higher way compared to the way students rated teachers along the rating scales. Teachers believed that they had good competency on equality and fairness in academic practices. Regarding the incidences of perceived discrimination based on ethnicity, teachers reported fair treatment of students, but students reported that there was a higher incidence of perceived discrimination.

As Gay (2010) argued, teachers often have more positive view of their cultural competences compared to their students. This highlights the difference in perception between teachers and students. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggested that there is a need for more objective assessment mechanisms to evaluate instructor's cultural competency and their effectiveness in promoting equality and justice in classroom settings and academic practices.

In Ethiopia, in recent years, all first year freshman program students are mandatorily taking courses in anthropology, civics, and global studies and related other courses to foster their sense of diversity awareness, sense of fairness and justice (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, the impacts of these courses have yet to be seen in terms of how deeply rooted problems of cultural competency and biases are being lessened. Ethiopian policy documents emphasize the significance of inclusivity in higher education. The new Education and Training Policy aim to enhance respect for cultural diversity and ensure fair educational access for all ethnic groups (Education & Training Policy of Ethiopia, 2023).

Students rated teachers' competency in effective grade management, respect for cultural differences and conflict resolution as below average. This is despite teachers reporting managing grading, conflicts, and cultural differences effectively. This underscores the need for ongoing professional development and cultural competency training for instructors (Nieto, 2010). The establishment of Inclusive university campuses needs true inclusivity and respect for diversity (Banks, 2009).

Regarding teachers' ethical conduct and conflict avoidance, students' ratings show a moderate level concerning teachers' bias avoidance and rumor control. On the other hand, teachers rated themselves highly. Maintaining a positive learning environment needs ethical behavior and effective conflict resolution (Deardorff, 2009). This finding signifies the need for improvements in conflict prevention and bias management techniques. An atmosphere of openness and responsibility needs to be nurtured in the University campuses to bridge this gap which can help students voice their concerns freely and engage in discussions of these matters (Banks, 2015).

The recent policies of the government related to higher education emphasize the need to enhance moral behavior and ethical conduct among students and teachers. Although its effect yet to be seen, the integration of ethics into the curriculum aim to promote moral behavior among both teachers

and students (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2019). There is a need to translate the policy into practical tools in the day-to-day classroom settings and academic activities of the universities.

Regarding social responsibility, teachers believed that they were doing their level best to address issues based on ethnicity and promote the free use of ethnic languages. However, students reported there is weak achievement in these areas. Fair learning environment and its establishment hinges on teachers' ability to report and manage issues of ethnic biases (Gay, 2000). The introduction of various courses is aimed at advancing students cultural competency so that they can confront ethnic biases and cultural incompetency that are seen in academic practices and classroom settings as well as outside of classrooms. The courses are further meant to advance social cohesion and inter-cultural understandings among students (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2015).

The results above regarding cultural diversity awareness demonstrated that both students and instructors had no problems in awareness of such diversity. On the other hand, the respondents confirmed that such awareness does not often manifest in actual, helpful behavioral actions on the campuses. Recognizing cultural diversity in campuses is an important first step for inclusive education (2005). Useful, practical pedagogical practices, however, must ensure that students from diverse cultural backgrounds are made to engage; recognizing students' ethnic backgrounds is not just enough (Gay, 2002). The findings further underscored some levels of differences between the two universities in terms of diversity awareness and implementation. This aligns with the general tendency in Ethiopian Universities that there may exist sound policies on cultural diversity and inter-cultural competency of faculty and students. Higher education institutions must not just acknowledge diversity; they must also promote practical actions to celebrate such diversity (Gurin et al., 2002). The findings also showed that students' actual experiences with ethnic-based biases in the same institution also varied, showing that some individuals may be more vulnerably exposed to such biases compared to others. Thus, there is no uniform experience among students. Individual students on university campuses may encounter nuanced biases and exclusions. Thus, there may be distinct ways of individual students experience with ethnic-based biases affecting their academic and personal lives (Sue et al., 2008).

The findings above further showed there exist preferential treatments of certain groups and discrimination against others in both Universities in student performance evaluations and classroom situations. The findings align with similar phenomenon reported by Sue and Sue (2016) who argued that discrimination against certain groups, based on their ethnic or racial backgrounds, in classroom contexts often occur in subtle forms. However, while students reported such discriminations and preferential treatments in grading practices, noting some real cases they knew, teachers disputed this, stating that such allegations are often noted more than baseless rumors. But it is understood that students' ethnics and linguistic backgrounds may expose them towards discriminatory practices (Hollins, 2012).

The findings above further underscored that the universities surveyed had some varying levels of institutionalizing programs to promote cultural competency among instructors and fight against discriminatory practices. However, a common problem in both universities was the effective implementation of such programs. A common set of challenges reported in both institutions included low leadership commitment, inconsistent follow-up and limited resources. Similarly

studies also reported that institutional programs often fail to materialize due to inadequate resources and weak professional support (Slaughter and Rhoades', 2020). The unique context of university setups, resources available and the level of leadership commitment can affect the actual application and implementation of policies on diversity and cultural competency (Hurtado et al., 1999).

Overall, the findings further underscored that, from the perspectives of students, more intentional events and dialogues are necessary to promote diversity awareness and fighting against ethnic based discriminations on campuses. Community engagement and systematized communication are necessary to promote inclusion and social justice in university campuses and classroom settings. Active, sustained cultural exchange events on campuses can serve this very well (Gorski and Pothini, 2018).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was undertaken with the aim of exploring the state of cultural competence and ethnic-based biases among the faculty and students of two selected public universities in Ethiopia, namely, Addis Ababa University and Wolaita Sodo University. The study employed a mixed-methods design, with a concurrent collection of field data using surveys of the faculty and undergraduate students in their second year and above at the time of the fieldwork. The faculty and the students were randomly selected, with a purposeful focus on certain colleges and campuses at both universities. Much of the data was collected using quantitative surveys. Qualitative data collected through interviewing faculty officers, student representatives, and other relevant stakeholders in academic administration supported the survey. The data were analyzed using appropriate tools, including SPSS for the surveys and MAXQDA 2022 for the qualitative data.

The survey indicates that faculty's self-ratings on the scale of measurement indicators for cultural competence and ethnic-based biases in academic engagements show a positive light. However, consistent with the general atmosphere of the increasingly hostile environment in the campuses of the Ethiopian public universities especially since the recent years, surveyed students reported that lack of culture competence and ethnic based biases have been increasingly interfering with academic and administrative duties of the Universities. Biases based on ethnicity interfering with academic duties.

The same surveys, as well as corroborating with interviews with officers, also indicated that there was an urgent need for increasing cultural competency awareness training and putting in place robust policies and guidelines that streamline the reporting and monitoring of infringement of the human and academic rights of students based on ethnic biases. The need also for incorporating cultural society, diversity awareness and cultural competency into the curriculum was further reported as a key finding

Both universities lacked robust policy and guidelines on the management of diversity and dealing with bias arising from a lack of cultural competence and ethnic-based biases. The study concludes that a positive learning environment cannot be realized without appropriate cultural competence among the faculty. The study recommends appropriate sensitivity and competence training, clear policies for reporting and managing biases, and integrating cultural diversity into the curriculum. These can help in enhancing inclusivity on campus, fighting against ethnic-based biases, and

promoting peaceful coexistence among the university community. Overall, promoting and holding cultural competence in higher education campuses in general and among the faculty in particular requires comprehensive and proactive policies and guidelines that are streamlined in the campus organizational cultures and practices. To this end, continuous training awareness creation campaigns, monitoring of ethnic based biases as affecting academic practices, community engagement among others are important measures to promote an inclusive campuses atmosphere that celebrates cultural diversity and priorities fair and equal treatment of campus community in general and student body in particular.

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Author Contributions

Sonan conceived the ideas; wrote proposal, designed instruments, collected data; did data analysis and write up. Dr Zerihun supported and advised on the instruments; data collection, analysis and write up.

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