

SHORT
COMMUNICATION

Some Thoughts on Requisites of Topnotch College of Education *

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Distinguished Participants

Ladies and Gentlemen

A few days ago, I was asked to make a few statements on this momentous occasion. I was not able to give much thought to what I need to say in the available time. Still, knowing very well that the center of excellence is responsibility of each of us individually and collectively, I decided to share some humble opinions to you.

Distinguished Participates

To me, the idea of Center of Excellence in teacher education and educational leaders' development is both exciting and challenging. It is exciting because it holds a lot of promise for the enhancement of teaching- learning and for a significant improvement in producing quality teachers, but it is also challenging because it requires, among others, intellectual, professional and management qualities of the highest order. In the interest of offering some scaffolding for subsequent discussions, I wish to dwell on the challenges.

Distinguished Participants

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I feel that a Center of Excellence calls for, among others, self-assessment of the current situation, anticipation of the future (or forethought), garnering past lessons, and re-vamping or stimulating partnership.

As you can see, my concern goes beyond lessons of the past. Let me now reflect on these matters.

To start with, self-assessment, an exercise which needs to be conducted at individual and institutional level, should target existing strengths and gaps. At the outset, a question that we need to pose to ourselves is: Is the concept of excellence understood in essentially the same way by all concerned? I feel that most people consider subject area and pedagogical competencies as well as professional quality and leadership skills as important aspects of the excellence we are aiming at. But what are the specific roles that the relevant individuals and institutions expected to play in the endeavor? What are the priorities? What should the coordination look like? I believe that further consultations on such germane issues accompanied by soul-searching exercise in relation to our mission can serve as a sturdy launching pad or springboard for the Center.

Going further in terms of self-assessment, no matter how good we feel we are as teachers and educational leaders, there is always room for improvement, especially when we aspire to become singularly first-rate. Excellence is a ruthless master; it has a low degree of tolerance of gaps and discrepancies in input or laxity in action. To cite an instance, we have reached a time when the emphasis in education has shifted from

- Learning to
- Learning how to learn, and
- Knowing how we learn

The general trend is thus to move towards improving the planning, decision-making and self-monitoring capabilities of learners, or in psychological parlance, to the enhancement of the executive function of the brain itself. The implication is that assessment of our standing vis-à-vis the state-of-art in our respective fields should serve as a humble beginning for the task ahead.

To take up the point concerning anticipation or forethought, which in a way is an extension of self-assessment, academic programs, especially those coming under centers of excellence, need to anticipate changes in the organization and management of educational provision. For instance, there is already veritable professional dissatisfaction regarding the excessive regimentation of different subject areas as if they are mutually exclusive. If this kind of discontent assumes wider and greater proportion, there is going to be more and disparity among courses and programs, including those that relate to

teacher training, with the attendant implications for curriculum design, staff training and program management.

To cite another example, for some years now, ICT has resulted in a diminished role of the teacher as providers of information. All evidence suggests that additional innovations will continue to emerge in the area with a possibility that the teacher could further be marginalized. The main issue here is not the marginalization of the teacher (since the teacher remains to be an important agent for attending to the affective and social needs of learners), but how the teaching-learning processes can best be engineered so that the teacher guides, assists, fosters and organizes learning platforms to help learners make the most appropriate use of ICT and to forestall negative consequences that could arise from its abuse.

Distinguished Participants

Let me now move on to past lessons. Beyond conceptual matters, past practices at close quarters could be instructive in pursuing our goals, if only they are taken seriously. By way of illustration, for about a decade beginning the 1960's, the Haile Selassie University (now AAU) used to recruit high-achieving students who expressed interest to become high school teachers from all over the country for admission to a preparatory /laboratory school for their final year of high school. In those years, the then Faculty of Education (which evolved in to the present College) enjoyed a supply of capable students from the preparatory school.

The profile of the Faculty was elevated. Self-identification with the Faculty and the teaching profession reached a decent level, and academic engagement became more stimulating.

Judging from the enthusiasm and performance of the Faculty's students of the faculty or of that time, it was anticipated that staffing high schools with competent and motivated teachers would soon be realized. But dishearteningly enough, it turned out that many of the graduates did not join high schools or did not stay there either because of the inadequate appeal of the employment conditions or because other more enticing alternatives, resting on their high academic record, were available to them, or for both reasons.

The user un-friendly and troublesome Postgraduate Diploma program in Teaching, which was born out of the controversial add-on modality of teacher training, strikes the same cord, although it is of a different breed. An important lesson of such experiences is that programs in teacher training and management, however admirable their intentions may be, are unlikely to meet the envisaged goals unless the system makes sufficient accommodations to receive and retain graduates.

Picking up on the research tradition of the College, it is refreshing to note the practice of organizing annual conferences on education although, at times, the practice has been suspect to fragmentation of issues and irregularity of occurrence. In the pursuit of excellence, practice can be strengthened by streamlining research agenda in order to focus on breakthrough ideas in teacher education and educational leadership. Frequent but short colloquiums possibly involving other centers of excellence, could serve as platform for monitoring progress, identifying timely solutions for problems, inspiring participants to engage in particular areas of investigation and for building a learning community befitting a center of excellence as a whole. Team work in research and publication should receive greater attention than hitherto. In terms of subject matter for investigation, just to mention an example, indigenous practices such as the teaching-learning processes in qene (ቅኔ) schools of traditional church education, if carefully and critically examined, can afford useful lessons and inspiration.

At even higher level, reflection and debate concerning the future of our values and a philosophy of education that resonates with the common aspirations of our people deserves a prominent place in our search for a more rational and effective paradigm for teacher training. More generally, when it comes to research, the Center should serve as laboratory and clearing house of ideas in matters that particularly relate to teacher education and educational leadership, including those linked with the yet un-born teacher policy.

Distinguished Participants

It is now time for me to briefly dwell on the revitalization of partnerships.

For sustained effectiveness, a center of excellence has to link with relevant institutions and professionals in a productive and sustained manner. To cite only a few cases, a carefully designed link with selected schools can allow both for practicum and pedagogical research. Systematic consultations with education ministries and bureaus are essential for introducing new programs and reforms.

Development partners can provide technical assistance and other forms of support. The private sector, if handled discreetly, may play a role in furthering the interest of the Center. However, in all such links, it is useful to identify common interests and to cement relations. It is also important for the Center to show that it has the internal strength to succeed in its mission although, ironically, the internal strength may partly depend on external input.

It is further essential that the concerned ministries and AAU provide the necessary lee way to expedite the activities of the Center. Additional leverage for the success of the Center could be attained through a consortium involving interested parties both local and

foreign. In as much as regulations emanating from the education ministries and AAU have considerable impact on the effectiveness of the Center, I find it useful to mention a couple of potential pitfalls in the area. Professionally inappropriate regulations or directives, and shortcomings in office practices should not be allowed to deter the direction and tempo of the Center, or suffocate the intellectual engagement of its members. Conversely, well-conceived proposals for enhancing the activities of the Center, as in the case of special guidelines for student admission, and staff development schemes that are essential for optimum functioning of the Center, should receive serious and favorable attention by the relevant authorities.

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To sum up what I said, the advent of a center of excellence in teacher education and educational leadership, however exciting it may be, demands a change in mental set, consensual approach, synergetic relationship among partners and continuous revitalization by taking into account the educational aspirations and problems of the country and scientific advancement in educational theory and practice around the world. Here is an opportunity; the onus to exploit it lies primary with us.

Thank You for Your Attention!!