Between a Rock and Hard Place: Stakeholders' Perspectives about the Private Provision of Higher Education

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Abstract

This study was conducted to gauge stakeholders' views towards the provision of private higher education in Ethiopia. More specifically, the study sought to examine stakeholders' perception regarding the importance of private higher education; academic provisions of private higher education institutes as contrasted with the public higher education sector, and government's role in the provision of private provision of higher education. The study followed a mixed method design employing concurrent procedures in which qualitative and quantitative data were gathered simultaneously. While quantitative data were gathered through survey questionnaire administered among 297 key stakeholders comprising parents, students, faculty, and employers, qualitative data were generated from relevant documents and in-depth interviews conducted with seven leaders of PHEIs willing to take part in the study. The results indicate that in the eyes of stakeholders, private higher education offers significant advantages in creating additional access and related benefits such as introducing improved student orientation. However, stakeholders equally observe that private higher education institutions fall far short of societal expectations due to their excessive profit-orientation and illicit behavior that demeans societal acceptance and sectoral legitimacy. It is argued that as a newly emerging sector whose viability is judged against the more experienced public sector, private higher education institutions should address their weaknesses in order to assure their viability and enhance the 'publicness' of their provisions.

Keywords: private higher education, private higher education institutions, benefits of private higher education, challenges of private higher education, public- private distinction

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Introduction

Traditionally, higher education (HE) has been conceived as a 'public good', the consumption of which confers significant 'external' or 'spillover benefits' to society as a whole, over and above the private benefits enjoyed by individual graduates (Lee 2017; Slantcheva & Levy, 2007; Teixeira & Amaral, 2001; Teixeira & Dill, 2011; Teixeira et al. 2017; Williams 2016). Recent years have, however, seen the erosion of traditional public ethos of many higher education systems and institutions as a result of the increasing role markets and market forces are assuming (Marginson ,2007; Teixeira & Dill, 2011; Teixeira et al., 2017). The growing relevance of markets in higher education policy and discourse has been driven by several complex factors including the crisis of the welfare state; extensive demand for higher education; increasing labor market demands for skilled and educated workforce; government need for cost containment; and supranational normative, mimetic and coercive pressures (Buckner, 2017; Collins & Neubauer, 2015; Jamishidi et al, 2012; Levy, 2013; Shah & Nair, 2016). A combination of these and related factors is shifting attitudes away from wholesale support for public higher education toward considering education as an individual good. In fact, for many countries the change has been a dramatic and controversial shift in policy, subject to market logics (Buckner, 2017). Among others, this change has led to the tremendous growth of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) across the globe. Partly fueled by this growth, the subject of private–public differentiation and its implications are increasingly becoming a matter of considerable scholarly interest in the extant literature since the mid-1980s (Bernasconi, 2011).

Over the last two decades, private higher education (PHE) in Ethiopia has grown in leaps and bounds. From almost none at the end of the 1990s there are now more than 260 institutions that accommodate 17% of enrollment at a national level (Tamrat & Levy, 2017). Despite this growth, evidence about PHE in general and the topic addressed in this study are quite limited. The few areas investigated within the sector include issues such as the profile and features of the sector (Tamrat, 2008, 2020); issues of quality assurance (Abebe, 2015; Tadesse, 2014); and leadership (Yirdaw, 2016). However, with the exception of a few (Samuel 2003; Tamrat & Fetene, 2021) no study has addressed the issue of how Ethiopian PHEIs are perceived by stakeholders in particular. This study seeks to bridge this research gap by exploring the perspectives of key stakeholders toward the private provision of higher education.

The Research Context

Since the establishment in 1950 of the first higher education institution, access to higher education has been mainly provided by public institutions in Ethiopia. For the next four decades, access was restricted to less than 1% of the relevant age cohort. However, since the late 1990s, more emphasis has been given to expanding the sector which has led to the proliferation of the public system and the mushrooming of private

higher education institutions which have become for the first-time part of a system that was fully represented by public institutions (Tamrat & Levy, 2017)

The impressive growth of PHEIs in Ethiopia has been mainly driven by the increasing demand for higher education and new policy directions set toward encouraging private investment in education (Transnational Government of Ethiopia (TGE) 1994; Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) 1996, 2003). This has led to the establishment of 50 public institutions and more than 260 private institutions in just two decades. The latest available data indicate that more than 110, 000 students (17% of enrollment at a national level) is accommodated in the sector (Ministry of Education, MoE, 2018). Nearly half of the Ethiopian PHEIs operate in the capital city while the rest are distributed across the country (Tamrat, 2020). This is a new trend compared to the earlier years when institutions offering undergraduate and graduate programs were mainly concentrated in the capital.

The majority of PHEIs run undergraduate programs mainly in business related subjects (e.g., accounting, finance, management, leadership); and health sciences (medicine, nursing, public health, clinical laboratory (Tamrat, 2020). This pattern contrasts with the trend in the public sector where institutions enroll 70% of their students in engineering and the sciences and the remaining 30% in social science and humanities (MoE, 2018). The last few years have, nevertheless, seen a surge in the number of accredited postgraduate programs, which is not surprising given the demand for more higher education.

Notwithstanding the abundance of anecdotal reports and generalizations, empirical evidence about public opinion towards the provision of private higher education institutions still remains non- existent or meagre—justifying the need for this study.

Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted to gauge the opinion of parents, students, faculty, and employers in the provision of private higher education in Ethiopia. More specifically, the research sought to examine stakeholders' perception about:

(a) the importance of private higher education and whether this provision should be further encouraged;
(b) academic provisions of PHEIs as contrasted with the public higher education sector;
(c) government role as regards private provision of higher education.

Literature Review: Stakeholders and Perspectives toward the Provision Of PHE

Although drawing agreements on key stakeholders of a given organization is not always easy (Mitchell et al., 1997), the values of stakeholder perspectives about educational provisions may not be debated.

Organizations are mindful of the views, interests, and needs of their stakeholders while setting and trying to realize their objectives. Within the wider literature, stakeholders are identified as groups or individuals who are influenced by the success or failure of an organization (Freeman et al. 2010). Paraphrasing Freeman (1984), Asiyai (2015) considers stakeholders as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of a given organization. Different scholars (e.g., Asiyai, 2015; Freeman et al., 2010; Stankevičienė & Vaiciukevičiūtė, 2014) categorize stakeholders differently. While Asiyai (2015) groups stakeholders into internal and external, Freeman et al. (2010) categorize them into primary and secondary. For Freeman et al, primary stakeholders are those who are directly affected by organizational performance, beneficiaries of activities performed by the organization and can have a direct impact on the success of the organization. Secondary stakeholders, on the other hand, play an intermediary role and are thought to have an indirect influence (Stankevičienė & Vaiciukevičiūtė, 2014). Looked at this way, the perspectives of stakeholders could be indicative of prevalent strengths, areas of improvement and the needed directions a given sector may take by informing public authorities and prompting policy decisions.

Perspectives toward PHEIs are often affected by their profile. Albeit their multifaceted nature, the extant literature classifies PHEIs into Elite/Semi-Elite, Religious/Cultural and Non-Elite/Demand absorbing, with some cross-cutting elements (Levy, 2009). Elite PHEIs are often positively viewed and grow in contexts where the private sector is considered to be superior to the public sector in terms of quality, status, job prospects and political order (Levy, 2009). With the exception of the US, elite institutions are either non-existent or limited in most parts of the world. While the semi elite category is steadily sprouting up in many places, the demand absorbing/nonelite which stems fundamentally from the excess of student needs is the most dominant form of private provision, especially in the developing world (Kinser, 2013). While some of these institutions carry the mantra of semi elite status, the majority of them are considered to be of dubious nature (Altbach et al., 2010; Kinser, 2013; Levy, 2013) and draw heavy criticisms. In general, the great majority of private institutions, especially the demand-absorbing ones, are considered to be relying too much on tuition and fees; narrowly concentrating on market oriented and inexpensive fields of studies; having low academic quality; unselective in their admission of students (often accepting those who are inferior in preparation and performance); reliant on part time staff; lacking the needed infrastructure and facilities; and not having well-established research culture (Altbach, 2005; Bernasconi, 2005; Giescke, 2006; Levy, 2002, 2013).

In countries where centralized planning has been the norm or where standardized missions and practices of institutions form traditional realities ascribed to public institutions, the immediate acceptance of PHEIs has been highly constrained (Levy, 2002). In situations where the public norm with regard to education has been linked with secularism based on service to broad national public interests (Slantcheva, 2005), the profit motive of PHEIs has been difficult to endorse. Often associated with business, the very idea of private can be suspect and can even be regarded as an intrusion into higher education (Kinser, 2013; Levy, 2005).

Perception towards PHEIs can also be influenced by the particular prohibitive or supportive public policy or what the government does in leveling the playing field for both private and public providers of higher education (Jamshidi et al., 2015; Klemencic & Zgaga, 2014; Levy, 2005). Rogue providers with excessive profit motive, myopic visions and illegal behavior can also affect the way PHEIs are perceived. What is more, institutional practices and the social and academic legitimacy that such institutions seek from their stakeholders can have negative or positive implications (Giesecke, 2006; Nicolescu, 2007).

Although the views toward private institutions are often influenced by their nature and institutional features, there are counter- arguments about the deficiency of forming opinions as such. Some writers contend that judgements should not be made based on the inherent features of institutions but rather on the social and cultural character of the outcome or "goods" produced by HEIs- whether private or public. For instance, Bozeman and Moulton (2011) contend that the publicness of institutions should be viewed based on a combination of external political and economic forces, and the relative influence of political and economic authority. This view assumes that, in order to fully understand the publicness of an institution, its organizational outputs and outcomes, as well as resource publicness will have to be examined (Lee, 2017). On the basis of this assumption, it is argued that since graduates from both types of institution similarly contribute to strengthening the human and economic capital of a given society, public as well as private higher education institutions should be equally regarded (Jameshidi et al.. 2015). Marginson (2007) notes,

> The outcomes of higher education institutions serve a public purpose in various ways. First, these organizations contribute to the economic development of the community through enhancing human capital of students, because the benefits of the instructional services are not limited to the students. Second, higher education institutions serve the public by producing research. Third, these institutions directly serve their local, regional, national and global communities through various community engagement activities. (p.328)

Against the above backdrop, this study investigated the views held by four key stakeholder groups about the provision of private higher education in Ethiopia.

Method

Design

The study followed a mixed method design employing concurrent procedures in which qualitative and quantitative data were gathered simultaneously. The research model applied is QUNA-qual model (Creswell & Poth, 2016), which is dominantly quantitative but has also a qualitative component with rich data drawn from in-depth interviews.

Instruments

Data for this study were drawn from four primary stakeholder groups: students, faculty members, parents and employers of graduates in five purposively chosen private institutions: Admas University, Omega Health College, HiLCoE- School of Computer Science and Technology, St. Mary's University. Data were gathered through survey questionnaire, in-depth interviews and documentary analysis. While purposively selecting these colleges, primarily we wanted to cover a range of field of studies they focus on (e.g., health, IT, business related studies). The fact that these colleges were pioneers in their focus areas was also considered as an additional reason for choosing them as our study samples.

Using proportional random sampling technique, a total of 400 survey questionnaires were sent to the institutions to be distributed among 30 final year students, their 30 parents, 25 faculty members, and 15 employers at each private institution. The sample numbers were determined in consultation with institutional leaders of the sample institutions who suggested the figures based on the availability of final year students, faculty size and the employers with whom they have very close contact. From a total of 400 questionnaires distributed, a total of 297 questionnaires (70%) were duly filled in and returned A total of 297 questionnaires (70%) were duly filled in and returned. This comprised 103 students, 50 faculty members, 90 parents and 54 employers.

The questionnaire explored stakeholders' views on three major themes: the importance of private higher education; the academic provisions of PHEIs in comparison with public HEIs; and government role in the operations of the PHE sector. Respondents were asked to rate statements given in the questionnaire using a five point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly disagree). These were finally reduced to three scales (disagree, neutral, agree) to facilitate the presentation and discussion of data.

In-depth interviews were held with seven volunteer academic leaders serving in the five PHEIs that participated in the study. A semi- structured interview schedule was developed for the purpose and was administered to each of the seven institutional leaders. The interview schedule was mainly used to triangulate data obtained through the other data collection tools and as a means of probing findings that required additional clarifications. The checklist comprised key issues related to the major objectives of the

study. Each interview lasted 50 to 60 minutes. With the consent of the respondents, the interviews were tape-recorded and later fully transcribed. Interviewees were assured that their anonymity would be maintained. Relevant documentary evidences were also gathered from written sources such as policies, proclamations, education statistical abstracts, sectoral plans and publications of the Higher Education Quality and Relevance Agency (HERQA).

Data analysis

The numerical data gathered through the survey questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean score and standard deviation. On the other hand, the data interpretation and analysis of qualitative data followed thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009). The analysis followed the major steps of organizing the data for analysis which included transcribing interviews; reading and re-reading or glossing all data to get the 'tone' of the results; coding the data by segmenting the interview transcripts into well-defined categories; using the coding to generate a description of the themes for analysis; and making interpretation of the themes identified (Creswell, 2013). By carefully studying, reading and rereading the transcribed data, it was possible to identify codes and categories and eventually come with themes and subthemes related to the central objectives of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Results

The presentation and discussion of findings from the different data sources have been guided by the three objectives of the study. Accordingly, the findings are discussed under three major categories after a brief description of respondents' profile given below.

Stakeholders' profile

As noted earlier, data obtained through the survey questionnaire were collected from key stakeholders in five private higher education institutions. Altogether, 297 respondents participated in responding to the survey. 103 of them (35%) comprised students; 50 (17 %) faculty; 90 (30 %) parents; and 54 (18 %) employers. The majority of stakeholders are male (65 %). Stakeholders are in one way or another attached to students who attend their education at private institutions. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents pay for a relative studying at a PHEI. Regarding the overall knowledge of employers and parents about the private higher education sector, 49% of parents said they have high and very high knowledge. Sixty five percent of the employers said their knowledge of the sector is moderate, while 28 % of them rated their knowledge as high or very high. This indicates that the external stakeholders appear to have a very good

knowledge of the private higher education sector perhaps implying the reliability of their observations.

Stakeholders' views about the importance of private higher education

One major objective of the study was to examine stakeholders' views toward the role of PHE and whether this role should be maintained in the future. Exploration was made about the particular importance of private higher education in terms of creating access, serving as models of entrepreneurial culture and whether investment in this sector should be encouraged.

Table 1
Stakeholders' views on the importance of PHE

Importance of PHEIs	Stakeholder	Mean	Standard Deviation
Importance in creating access	Employers	2.84	0.47
	Parents	2.93	0.30
	Faculty	2.98	0.14
	Students	2.98	0.14
Entrepreneurial nature of PHEIs	Employers	2.60	0.61
	Parents	2.81	0.47
	Faculty	2.91	0.29
	Students	2.81	0.53
Need for maintaining private investment	Employers	2.88	0.39
	Parents	2.94	0.31
	Faculty	2.94	0.23
	Students	2.90	0.36

The findings reveal that stakeholders are overwhelmingly positive about the roles of PHEIs in terms of creating additional access for higher education. As can be seen in Table1, this is evidenced through a mean rating of more than 2.8 from a maximum mean score of 3. Positive ratings are also observed about the entrepreneurial culture of PHEIs which was rated between the mean scores of 2.6 (employers) and 2.91 (faculty). Similar observations were made by interviewees:

> The establishment of private higher education institutions has provided additional opportunities for students who would not have enjoyed such opportunities had educational provisions were exclusively provided by public institutions. This is a unique opportunity compared to the past (Interviewee 03).

The findings indicate overall positive ratings about the importance of PHEIs which is consistent with the extant literature that shows strong emphasis on the role of PHE in increasing access and having a strong entrepreneurial culture orientated toward better customer service (Benett et al, 2010; Galbraith, 2003; Kruss, 2002; Shah & Nair, 2016; Wilkinson & Yussof, 2005).

As a follow up to their initial observations, respondents were further asked about the preferred modalities in which PHEIs should continue to operate. Choices were given among regular, continuing and distance education which are identified as the major modes of training in the Ethiopian higher education sector (FDRE, 2019). National data indicate that although regular and evening classes are popular modalities offered by the vast majority of PHEIs, distance education remains the only area where the private sector continues to excel the public sector in terms of student size (MoE, 2018). This has been attributed to the fact that PHEIs have been running programs in this modality for many years and the flexibility they exercise in expanding their programs across different localities (Tamrat, 2008). However, while the choice for regular and extension modes of delivery is stronger, respondents' lower rating of the distance mode (M=2.21; SD 0.88) is perhaps an indication of their relative reservation toward this modality.

Table 2

Stakeholders' views about modes of academic provision

Modality	Mean	Standard Deviation
Regular	2.97	0.24
Extension	2.89	0.39
Distance	2.21	0.88

In fact, the finding appears to concur with government views and practices toward this particular modality. In 2012 distance education was temporarily banned due to claims of substandard provision in both the private and public sectors (Tamrat & Teferra, 2019). The same observation is documented in the recently developed Education Road Map of Ethiopia where this mode of provision was vilified as the weakest (MoE, 2018).

Stakeholders' views about the academic provisions of PHEIs

The second objective of this study was related to gauging stakeholders' views about the academic provisions of PHEIs as compared to public providers. The comparison with public universities was deliberate as the public sector is often used as a benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of PHEIs in the wider literature (e.g., Wilkinson & Yussof, 2005).

It is worth noting that Ethiopian PHEIs exhibit significant differences with public institutions and among themselves. Previous research has shown that the institutional array among the PHE sector which is dominated by demand absorbing institutions ranges

from those that accommodate a limited number of students to those that enroll tens of thousands of students (Tamrat, 2020). Although there are very few institutions that exhibit a research focus, the majority function as teaching institutions with little or no involvement in knowledge generation (Tamrat, 2008, 2020). The majority are perceived as low prestige institutions operating 'at the lower end of the academic pecking order' (Altbach, 2016). Some are even labeled 'diploma mills' owing to the various fraudulent activities they undertake in order to maximize their pecuniary gains (Tamrat, 2017, 2020).

Table 3

Stakeholders' views toward academic provisions of PHEIs

Statement	Stakeholder	Mean	Standard Deviation
PHEIs have capacity limitation of PHE	Employers	2.20	0.76
	Parents	2.07	0.90
	Faculty	1.96	0.80
	Students	1.83	0.87
Graduating from Private HEIs is easier than graduating from Public HEIs	Employers	2.39	0.81
	Parents	2.03	0.85
	Faculty	1.94	0.81
	Students	1.62	0.78
Public HEIs perform better than private HEIs	Employers	2.10	0.76
	Parents	1.72	0.85
	Faculty	1.43	0.63
	Students	1.58	0.75
There are some PHEIs which are better than public HEIs	Employers	2.34	0.80
	Parents	2.83	0.43
	Faculty	2.78	0.50
	Students	2.82	0.48

The empirical findings shown in Table 3 reveal that, comparatively speaking, employers (M=2.02; SD 0.76) and parents (M= 2.07; SD 0.9) exhibited a higher level of agreement as regards the capacity limitations of PHEIs. The only group that had a high level of disagreement as regards the capacity limitations of PHEIs were students. This result might have been influenced either by students' inside knowledge about the sector and/or the apparent feeling that exposing deficiencies of the sector would undermine the position of their own institutions and their education. Stakeholders were similarly asked if graduating from private HEIs is 'easier' compared to public HEIs. As might be seen in the table, while employers (M=2.39; SD 0.81) and parents (M= 2.03; SD= 0.85) agreed,

faculty (M=1.94; SD 0.81) and students (M=1.62; SD 0.78) disagreed. This may be again due to the implication of the statement to the image students and faculty have of their own institutions and/or the possible knowledge gap among the different stakeholders. When it comes to particular questions related to institutional performance, instructors and students appear to hold defensive positions that are not difficult to understand.
Regarding the rating of an overall public versus private performance, with the exception of employers (M= 2.01; SD 0.76), the remaining stakeholders showed their reservations. An interviewee comments,

> Most of the private institutions are small in size and lack a huge set of resources that the public sector can take advantage of. This is in most cases the reason for the capacity limitations observed between the two sectors. This does not necessarily mean that there are no private institutions that outperform the public sector. In fact, there are few private providers that have won a high level of credibility among the public as compared to and even better than public institutions, but they remain very few in number (Interviewee 07).

Stakeholders' acknowledgement of the availability of private institutions that offer quality education better than the public ones might suggest that some PHEIs are gradually emerging as strong competitors to the much older and better resourced public institutions. However, stakeholders' overall views on the issue of quality provided by PHEIs looks mixed. Some of the interviewees intimated that quality education is an institutional issue and cannot be sectoral. A few argue that in a situation where there is no system of measuring the competencies of graduates from public and private providers, associating poor quality education exclusively to PHEIs is stereotypical and misguided. Others note that educational quality has been deteriorating in the country owing to the aggressive expansion of higher education and, if at all responsibility is to be apportioned, public as well as private providers are equally to blame. Nevertheless, most informants offered reasons as to why training and education offered in most of PHEIs could be regarded as questionable which include: the admission of less qualified students; the excessive focus of most private providers on generating profit; and HERQA's limited capacity to provide the needed guidance and protection and weed out illicit providers.

Stakeholders' views toward government role

The third major objective of this study was to examine stakeholders' views towards the role of the government in the provision of PHE and how this impacts their views toward PHE. Stakeholders were first asked if they think existing government regulations on private institutions were too lax, to which most agreed as can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Government roles and responsibilities toward PHEIs

Statement	Stakeholder	Mean	Standard Deviation
Lax regulations	Employers	2.58	0.64
	Parents	2.24	0.83
	Faculty	2.15	0.88
	Students	2.22	0.78
Need for quality control	Employers	2.94	0.31
	Parents	2.91	0.39
	Faculty	2.96	0.19
	Students	2.90	0.36
Government interference	Employers	2.94	0.24
	Parents	2.97	0.18
	Faculty	2.94	0.30
	Students	2.92	0.39
Need for levelling the playing field	Employers	2.54	0.73
	Parents	2.71	0.64
	Faculty	2.74	0.59
	Students	2.78	0.54
Need for legal protection	Employers	2.94	0.24
	Parents	2.97	0.18
	Faculty	2.94	0.30
	Students	2.92	0.39

Government's role in regulating the PHE sector could be varied and at times controversial (Tamrat & Levy, 2017). Among the stakeholders, employers' level of agreement is the highest (M=2.58; Sd 0.64) when it comes to the existence of lax regulations. This is in line with respondents' opinion about the need for control as may be seen in the mean scores relating to 'the need for quality control.' Such a high rate of agreement was observed only for statements related to whether PHEIs should be allowed to offer training in regular and extension modes. These views appear to be indicative of a ubiquitous concern about a private sector solely left to market forces and suggest the need for a large degree of central coordination by the government. Government's reluctance in protecting private providers' image in situations where the public has not yet developed full trust in the sector has also been raised by interviewees. In the words of one interviewee, "PHE is a sector that has to be babysat by the government".

Critiquing government directives, interviewees also accuse government owned and, to some degree, private media of damaging the credibility of private providers. An informant's compliant below is a somewhat representative response:

> A cover story in a leading government Amharic newspaper strictly warns parents and children to think twice before choosing PHEIs. A private newspaper has recently published a list of private providers that have been given warning from concerned bodies. This is illegal and unethical. Who would dare to study in institutions that have been given warnings? As a private provider, if you don't enroll new students you are out of business. (Interviewee 02)

Stakeholders' views were also sought about the manners in which they think PHEIs are treated by the government. Almost all stakeholders indicated a strong feeling about government not treating private and public institutions on equal basis. This is evident in the rating given by stakeholders about the need for levelling the playing field (ranging from a mean of 2.54 in the case of employers to a mean of 2. 78 in the case of students). The unanimous responses from interviewees similarly indicated that government is advancing "double standard" and offering public HEIs preferential treatment. As an example, interviewees pointed out the practice of accreditation which should be met by all private providers but not applicable to public providers. This is despite the availability of a legislative provision to the contrary. A remark by one of the interviewees is more revealing:

> Take what AAU [Addis Ababa University] is recently doing. It has opened a number of postgraduate programs across its various colleges and it is planning to offer training to thousands of students in the evening programs. I know the University has been struggling to run its regular programs due to lack of staff shortage, lack of adequate facilities such as laboratories and libraries. Has it employed new faculty for the evening program? Has it opened new libraries? The answer is, 'Obvious no!' Still, the Ministry has turned deaf ear to the university's aggressive move to open numerous programs knowing very well that it has not made the necessary preparations to host new programs. This is a stark example of double standard. (Interviewee 06)

The findings from the qualitative and quantitative data corroborate research results in local and international contexts where public-policy regulations are demanding on the private sector but expansive or even lax when it comes to the public side (Klemencic & Zgaga, 2014; Robossi, 2012; Tamrat, 2019; Tamrat & Levy, 2017). Encouragingly, a couple of the informants were found to be quite optimistic about the future despite the various forms of government interventions they are not happy about. One interviewee noted,

> As long as private higher education institutions can provide quality education, there is no reason why the government would not make the environment more

> enabling and help create positive views toward these providers. Since "Higher Education" is too big a sector to be monopolized by the government, private institutions should consider current challenges as temporary setbacks. (Interviewee 07)

Table 4 further depicts stakeholders' positive opinion about legally protecting private higher education like any other area of investment. All respondents expressed their agreement at the highest level (extending from a mean score of 2.92 to 2.97), emphasizing the need for legal protection of private investment in higher education. A similar high level of agreement was also obtained as regards government's role in facilitating improved working conditions and providing the necessary support for PHEIs. Interviewees were also found to be positive about this suggested policy direction indicating their conviction about the role of an enabling policy environment in enhancing the growth of PHEIs:

> The private higher education sector needs to be protected like any other form of investment. It is only the availability of such protection schemes that can attract resourceful and sustainable investors. Without such an assurance, more fly by night providers can make their way threatening the very essence of the sector itself .(Interviewee 05)

Appreciative as they are towards the overall enabling policy direction, stakeholders, at the same time, aired serious concerns and fears when they were enquired about the factors which they think will affect the future of the PHE sector. The results shown in Table 5 below indicate that a combination of internal and external factors account for the success or demise of the sector.

Table 5

Factors that can affect the future of PHEIs

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
Sudden government action	2.53	0.61
Profit orientation of sector	2.62	0.56
Minimal government support	2.48	0.66
Tuition- dependence	2.57	0.59
Limited capacity of PHEIs	2.31	0.56

Among all the factors considered, those related to profit orientation of the sector (M= 2.62; SD 0.56) and its tuition dependence (M= 2.57; SD 0.59) have been identified as the most critical factors predicted to affect the sector's future. Other factors that attracted a similar level of attention were sudden government action (M= 2.53; SD 0.61) and the lack of government support (M= 2.48; SD 0.66). Most of the interviewees

similarly indicated the challenges of planning in the long term due to government arbitrary policies and abrupt decisions that make the sector unstable and highly unpredictable. The emphasis given to the government and PHEIs themselves is a clear indication that, in the eyes of stakeholders, the development of private higher education can only be facilitated with the collaborative of the government as a policy maker at the macro level and the private sector as provider of higher education at the micro level (Jamshidi et al., 2012)

Discussion

This study highlights the role of PHE within a public dominated higher education landscape and how its functions are viewed by primary stakeholders of the sector like parents, employers, faculty and students. Informed by the broader public goals of national development and progress (Buckner, 2017), policy direction as regards public and private provision of higher education in Ethiopia has given private higher education a new space for operation since the end of the 1990s and a gradual and cautious public acceptance in Ethiopia. This has been influenced by government's incapacity to create additional access to higher education and a new policy interest to diversify the financing of education in general (TGE, 1994). This has contributed to the growth of the PHE by breaking the ideational opposition towards PHE which was outlawed by the previous socialist government in the country.

The study revealed stakeholders' positive views toward the role of PHE in the creation of access and its business- like nature in providing improved customer orientation as compared to the public sector. Despite their reservation on the distance modality, study participants are positively disposed toward the role of the private higher education sector in the provision of higher education. In a positive sense, stakeholders' overall perception appears to dovetail the increasing realization within the wider literature that both public and private HEIs have a significant contribution to access creation and economic growth through the production of educated and skilled graduates (Buckner, 2017; Jamshidi et al., 2015; Teixeira et al, 2017; Williams, 2016). Stakeholders also indicated in strong terms their preference for the provision of legal protection to the sector and the need for facilitating the working conditions for PHEIs. However, the dissonance between positive policy directions and poor implementation were also noted especially as regards government interference and arbitrary decisions which have been identified as impending factors toward the promotion of private higher education which calls for strategic interventions and improvements in the area.

The findings of the study further indicate that the performance of the private sector can be affected by factors such as excessive tuition- dependence and commercial interest, sudden government actions, minimal government support and limited capacity of PHEIs. This is despite the fact that there are a limited number of PHEIs which perform much better than the public sector and whose performance can be emulated.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study hold wider implications and call for fundamental improvements in areas where deficiencies and gaps have been noted. Despite the overall positive feeling about the promotion of PHE as a complimentary sector to the public dominated system, the findings of the study suggest that exclusive reliance on tuition, excessive profit orientations, and the illicit behavior of private providers as factors that could seriously jeopardize current views toward PHEIs and their future. In fact, the negative views or reservations PHEIs received in some areas are a clear indication of how PHEIs themselves play to the 'suspicions' held by stakeholders. As noted by Buys (2019), maintaining the initial appreciation of private higher education as a partner in transforming society in general and higher education in particular requires, among others, the PHE's own effort in becoming a well governed, managed and ethically responsible sector. Indeed, the sector cannot achieve the status of a respectable partner in the national higher education system in the absence of meeting the various expectations set by stakeholders, government and the society at large. In fact, it appears that the limitation of the PHE sector in providing quality education and becoming a strong contender to the public sector is an ambition that cannot be fulfilled easily unless significant changes are witnessed in enlisting government support to the sector and in mitigating the excessive business orientations of PHEIs.

It can be anticipated that PHE will continue to be a complementary component of the Ethiopian higher education sector that has already become a two-sector phenomenon. On the basis of the findings reported, it can be suggested that the sector should be allowed to thrive with all the proper monitoring and assistance required on the part of the government. A move toward this direction may not be beneficial only to those who invest in the sector anew but also for policy makers who should continue to capitalize on the strength of the sector, incentivize it and create the necessary system of accountability against various forms of illegal operation. Individual PHEIs should also recognize the need for productive regulation and self-discipline that is beneficial to the system as a whole and to their own legitimacy and future. Towards this end, it can be suggested that public policy need not be marginal to private sector development at a time when the sector is steadily becoming a crucial part of the overall national higher education system (Levy, 2011; Tamrat, 2019). PHEIs should equally seek ways of strengthening their existing contributions and capacities to garner the required acceptance and legitimacy from the government and society at large by upholding the rule of law in all their operations and improving their legitimacy

Despite its limitation in terms of the number and type of stakeholders involved, this study provides a rare empirical evidence as regards how the role of PHEIs is viewed by key internal and external stakeholders. The insights drawn from the findings of the study hopefully add to the meagre research in the area while also suggesting the need for regarding private higher education as one priority area in setting higher education policy directions and more importantly as part of a system that needs closer monitoring and

substantial support to respond to wider societal expectations (Shah & Nair, 2016; Teixeira et al, 2017).

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