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Book Review

Quality of Higher Education in Public Institutions, 2009, Addis Abeba: ISBN 13 978 99944 50 31 2 pp.1-266, Publisher : Forum for Social Studies :Authors: Amare Asgedom, Ayele Shibeshi, Dawit Mekonnen, Mulu Nega, Tesfaye Semela, Wana Leq, Wossenu bYimaq, Yalew Endawoke & Yohannes Woldetensae

By Mammo Muchie

The transition of higher education, like Ethiopia itself, has gone through three major changes since the early 50s: the first is the phase of an elite education system where quality over numbers was the guiding norm under the traditional monarchy. The second phase was when the country fell under the military rule where shallow ideological control penetrated also the educational system. The third phase is the ethnic federal arrangement where the country seems to be facing a ‘dramatic expansion of higher education’ with all the problems that this has brought to the decline in maintaining high level quality in the curriculum, the graduates and the overall educational standard.

Both public and private higher education colleges have grown since 1991. Public universities are expected to be 33 this year. Enrolment into higher education sector has also expanded with a policy of 70:30 with 70% catering for science and technology students and 30% for humanities and social sciences.

What the study examines is whether this new development to increase access to higher education is meeting the necessary quality requirements or not: data–anchored research has been undertaken by starting from pre-university preparation, language proficiency, the way the quality assurance system and accreditation functions, the relevance of the curricula, the staff load, incentives and appropriateness of their own pedagogical training to teach in higher education, and the way the expansion is fed by appreciating how far the preparation is carried out.

This was a study supported from the civil society research fund by the European Union and can be seen as providing an independent research that sheds useful light and data on the way the higher education area is evolving in Ethiopia. The authors have used to their credit the Amharic language to report their findings with both an executive summary in English and a revealing and extensive quantitative assessment based on interviews of all stakeholders on the quality of science education indicators in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar and Hawassa Universities in English.

The quantity vs. quality paradox in the expansion of higher education is expressed vividly from the interviews taken to prepare the extensive paper on the quality of science education indicators. As one of the Physics student that was interviewed put it:

“ There is a saying which goes: “ kebezat-yeshalal tirat” (quality is better than quantity)... Instead of enrolling 1000 students and getting the same number of unqualified and incompetent graduates, our country could have become much better off if the university had enrolled only 100 students and provided them with the best teachers, availed all needed materials and facilities- and produced 10% of the number of the graduates that the universities are awarding degrees to these days. We are now about to graduate... but we know little compared to what we are supposed to know” (Translated into English from the Amharic—p.244

Preparatory teaching and learning is inadequate. “The problem becomes even worse in the absence of interactive teaching-learning process due to heavy reliance on the Plasma TV lessons in preparatory schools.” (p.240) The students are subjected to a learning style that forces them to be passive rather than be inspired, active, critical and engaging. They get disengaged with distance and

remote lectures by people who do not have a clue of their environment, the size of the classes, and their learning needs.

The fact that the quality of education is growing inversely proportional to the increased expansion of higher level private and public education is also recognised by the Government of Ethiopia. The Ministry of Education complements the Government for widening access and redressing justice, but also notes that there are still weaknesses in quality of education, the instruction, the preparation of the students, the examination and management. (p.6)

We mention some of the problems, and not all, that continue to plague the education system mentioned in this study:

1. High enrolment not matched by existing capacity resulting in negative quality of education
2. Acute lack of education materials, equipment, computers and teaching materials
3. Limited broad band limiting internet access
4. Staff qualification profile teaching in higher education is woefully inadequate. “ 52 % of the teachers in (higher education) are Diploma and Bachelor degree holders, while the Ministry of education’s bench mark is 20% for the first degree holders. The proportion of current PhD holders is about 9 % while the recommended minimum is 30 %. The qualification profile of the academic staff in the 12 new universities is much worse.”(P.xxi)
5. Research is not easy to do even if there is time allocated with such poor staff profile
6. Without research, teaching becomes state and most uninspiring and like a chore
7. Amongst the new universities, they all have yet to fulfil the Ministry of education’s criteria of qualifying as a university
8. Students admitted to higher education despite low performance and there appears no organised remedial academic support or guidance
9. Enrolment expansion at the expense of declining resource allocation per student. “..There were a total of 34,556 students in public institutions and the annual expenditure per student was birr 9,505.74...in the 2005/6 academic year, the number of students in the public HEIs shot up to 173,901, while the expenditure per student dropped to birr 3,824.59.” With the Birr devalued, this may have even decreased further now.
10. Pedagogic creativity very limited to lectures and abstract subjects

11. Curriculum development with academic staff with a first degree is stunted rather than flourishing
12. Difficulties in creating strong and consistent assessment schemes
13. No systematic feedback procedures to use for improving learning skills
14. Inadequate institutionalisation of quality control systems
15. Strange practice of imposing accreditation schemes for private universities whilst exempting the new public universities and colleges.

It looks that the list of problems with the way the higher education sector appears to be plagued with is endless. The key dilemma appears to be the political need to increase numbers without factoring in the requisite quality measures that are essential to make the higher education system succeeded and grow. This appears to mirror the general dilemma and approach the current Government takes with regards to Ethiopia's development in general. The Government continues to claim the economy is growing at more than 10 % for a number of years, and peasant farmers are getting richer, but in reality the country is far from resolving food security and the people who are poor remain unacceptably large in number. The Government also claims in the next five years the industrialisation of Ethiopia will grow by 21 % of GDP. This again appears similar to the higher education matter; and one can wonder and ask legitimately: which industry, what do they produce, who produces them, what benefits to the economy, what kinds of linkages with the rest of the economy, how do the people benefit from the industries that are expected to grow so fast in the next five years- all these quality issues are never the concern, only the wish to appear that the economy is growing at a higher rate than at any time in Ethiopia's long life. Only stating a huge number of success, perhaps also to discourage those from asking and trying to find solutions and those who may honestly try to appreciate the difficulties that are needed to be confronted to facilitate the country's embarkation on a reliable trajectory of transformation where all can be educated, all can be fed and all can drink clean water and all can have adequate shelter and health and lead a life with work and happiness. The idea of playing the number game is truly unethical, especially when even the Government's ministry of education recognised it as a problem too!

The articles that deal with the curriculum relevance in the book are worth much more to reflect upon. This area of the appropriate curriculum is not easy to settle. Even in this worthy study whilst

the issue of appropriate curriculum is recognised, when it comes to the evaluation it is all related to the existing flawed and mostly copied curriculum from outside. The authors recognise that since the 1950s the system of education that evolved in Ethiopia is not built from the intellectual and linguistic foundation that Ethiopians had invented and should have striven at all costs to nourish and nurture. Learning from outside is not the same thing as of ignoring or displacing what you have with what you find from outside. Learning means embedding what is from outside into what exists in the inside and nurturing the hybrid to emerge with its own identity and energy. It means translating the sciences and engineering into the vernacular languages from Geez to all the other main languages such as Amharic and Oromopia from.

Ethiopia was one of the few civilisations that had developed its own systems of education though it was closely linked to theology and the ancient language Geez. After the Second World War ended one of the educated Ethiopians Ato Mekonen Desta apparently tried to create a national curriculum based on how Europeans teach Latin and Greek to their students before they embark in other fields. He developed textbook, which I have been informed, unless they have disappeared, still exist in the Ethiopian Ministry of Education to teach all Ethiopian children in Geez before they embark learning with other languages as medium of instruction. Unfortunately the British system was adopted and Ato Mekonen Desta's efforts to create a national system of education from primary education to higher education were shelved. It appears Ethiopia has not yet found a way to anchor her educational pedigree and civilisation on a national-African cultural foundation that the people who live in Ethiopia can easily connect and identify with.

Authors like Dr. Amare Asgdom reflect deeply about this matter in a wider African context and distinguish culture anchored curriculum and education with academic, vocational and other variations. They appear to suggest that some mixed model may have been useful and productive without undermining the culture- based education. As it stands now what emerged is a culture displacing curriculum and educational ethos which has polarised society rather than cement its various glues together.

The curriculum for Ethiopia's educational development was modelled according to Anglo-Saxon Western education:

“ Ethiopia’s modern education is modelled on western education, which is intrinsically related to that society’s educational philosophy, interests, and life styles. This educational philosophy tends to encourage individualism, materialism, and competition. It tries to purge passion from knowledge, craft and rational logic. This does not harmonise with Ethiopia’s traditional values of cooperation, communal responsibility, unity of the spiritual and intellect, and inseparability of the individual from the community; therefore it is necessary to develop a curriculum that is embedded in the best values of our cultures and fits our specific situation” (p.xvii)

When the military regime adopted Marxism-Leninism, they imposed this ideology crudely on the Anglo Saxon model.

The current Government follows mimicking the western education model.

An education model that harmonises Ethiopia’s tradition with modernity and tries to do this without undermining the values of the people is yet to be born.

Ethiopia is far from having this African-nationally and philosophically informed curriculum that tries to combine the tradition with the modern borrowed from outside. The current Government has divided the country cynically along vernacular-ethnic and cultural boundaries making constituents within each to feel different rather than to belong together. This is different from permitting as many languages as possible to be used for learning purposes. This right to use languages should not be conflated with using the same language to be the basis for defining or enclosing or meandering regions politically with the risk of imposing apartness those that belong with those that do not belong. What others like India did is develop a link language so that all can communicate as one nation.

In Ethiopia, it appears the link language is not Geez or another one of the major languages, but English. The problem, as many of the writers in this study of quality of higher education in Ethiopian public institutions demonstrate is that not only the students lack proficiency in English, but also even those who teach them also suffer from a deficiency in English language skills making

the situation to reach alarming proportion regarding the absolute decline in the quality of education and the graduates in Ethiopia.

In general this is a highly refreshing work. It is well researched.. The publishers, the Forum for Social Studies, and the authors Mulu Nega, Yohannes Wolde Tensae, Amare Asgedomj, Wosenu Yimam and Wana & Ayate, Dawit, Tesfaye and Yalew together have done an excellent work by undertaking a painstaking and scientific approach to reveal the plight and difficulties that higher education has run into in Ethiopia. I recommend that this book is read by all Ethiopians who would like Ethiopia's educational system to emerge with strength and a bright future. It will be useful if more people are aware of its existence and it will be useful more and more people read it and engage with both its diagnoses and the limitations, sufficiency and insufficiency of the recommendations offered by the authors. What is needed is not palliative measures, but the whole approach must change- from what it means to build a functioning educational system that connects schooling from the basic to the higher education and the vice versa. It also requires how this education system feeds into economy, society and the community and conversely how society relates to knowledge and education. Nothing but an honest debate is needed to get education right as indeed all other things that go wrong in a society that has high potential to make a big difference not only for itself , but also Africa as a whole.