
ETHIOPIA: The dilemmas of higher education expansion

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Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. More than three-fourths of the nation's primary economic activity involves small-scale agriculture, not only highly inefficient but extremely vulnerable to variations in climate and international market prices. To move from an agrarian to a modern economy, Ethiopia requires citizens with more education. This necessity is especially critical in a country with the 15th-largest population on the planet and a median age of barely 17 years. Accordingly, the government has expanded the higher education system while growing enrolment, both at breakneck speed.

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Ethiopia had only two universities for much of the 20th century. Since the mid-1990s, the number of private institutions has expanded, with simultaneous growth of the public sector. Today 19 additional public universities represent either newly established institutions or colleges merged and upgraded to university status. There are also 26 regional teacher education colleges and approximately 60 accredited private post-secondary institutions (only one recognised as a university).

The pace of growth has been intoxicating, and the challenges of current circumstances in Ethiopia make the expansion of the higher education system all the more daunting. The country reflects the tensions that Sir John Daniels graphically presents in his 'iron triangle', where access, cost and quality are precariously balanced against each other.

Strong (male) enrolment growth

At all levels, access to education in Ethiopia has improved significantly, with greater numbers of students completing secondary education and continuing on to postsecondary study.

Ministry of Education statistics show that during the 2000-01 academic year, undergraduate enrolment at public universities (not including distance and evening enrolment) was approximately 34,000. By 2007-08 regular undergraduate enrolment had increased to more than 125,000. Many more men than women, however, are benefiting from expanded access: less than 30% of the undergraduate enrolment and barely 10% of graduate enrolment is female.

Quality challenges

While difficult to measure, quality has cause for concern.

The number of instructors has not kept pace with enrolment growth. In 2000, slightly more than 3,400 teachers provided instruction at Ethiopia's universities. In 2008-09, there were approximately 7,500 university instructors. In other words, while enrolment nearly quadrupled, teaching staff barely doubled. This disparity is also apparent in the evolution of the teacher-student ratio, which grew from 1:8 in 1995 to 1:15 today.

The system struggles to fill many teaching vacancies given the absence of enough qualified Ethiopians to fill these positions. As a result, instructors are also hired from abroad. Most universities do not have the resources to effectively supervise or mentor so many new and inexperienced instructors. Fewer than 20% of the current teachers hold masters degrees and fewer than 4% hold PhDs, underscoring the limited experience with scholarship.

Quality is also constrained by infrastructure. During the past two years, the country has suffered from regular rolling blackouts, and few universities have generators to keep technical infrastructure operational during power cuts.

The construction of classroom space, expansion of library collections, addition of computer labs, and the development of electronic networks lag behind enrolment expansion. International agencies are helping the government to develop new facilities and infrastructure. However, these efforts are largely uncoordinated and will take time.

Cost considerations

The cost of educating a growing cohort of university students is quickly exceeding available government funds. A new policy has eased the country away from fully subsidised higher education to a cost recovery scheme, but this system will not return funds to government coffers for several years to come.

The government currently depends on international aid as well as expatriate faculty to fill in the many gaps that result from the rapid growth of higher education. But even with aid, funding is insufficient to address the enormous needs of this nascent system.

Human resources as a 'moving target'

Too many of the best and brightest academic and administrative staff in Ethiopia are on the move. Graduate study and professional development opportunities are currently available overseas through national and donor agency programmes.

In the long term this will certainly strengthen Ethiopian higher education. However, educational opportunities abroad often lead to 'brain drain', while even the short-term absence of professors and

administrators presents significant challenges at the home institution. Extra teaching responsibilities fall onto the colleagues who remain behind, and a wide range of development and research projects are often handed off to less-experienced and less-qualified staff.

Meanwhile, the movement of individuals from one university to another or out of higher education altogether is pervasive throughout Ethiopia. Staff turnover takes place at all levels, driven by the desire to improve earnings and to move from rural toward urban areas. Constant staff turnover wreaks havoc on an institution's capacity to operate efficiently and to manage long-term planning and development.

Long-term planning vs short-term action

What are the alternatives to rapid growth without the corresponding infrastructure, staff or resources? In 1999 less than 1% of the age cohort was enrolled in higher education. If the Ethiopian government had decided to "build the house before moving in" for a decade or more the country might not have achieved much progress in expanding access. Instead, the government has pushed forward, putting pressure on university leaders and instructors to 'catch up' as they can while providing larger numbers of young Ethiopians with opportunities for further study.

Today 3% of the age cohort in Ethiopia is enrolled in higher education, according to UNESCO data. Although far short of international levels, Ethiopia has achieved a rapid 300% rise in enrolment and the government will continue to push for greater gains. The question is whether the universities respond to enrolment gains with relevant resources and personnel.

This period has proven to be an exciting time for Ethiopia's higher education system, but 'growing pains' are evident and will continue, given such rapid expansion. At this critical stage, where much has already been accomplished, quality assurance and a commitment to appropriate and sustained infrastructure must rise to the top of the national agenda.

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