Adapting to Global Trends: Why and How Is the Ethiopian Higher Education Changing?

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ABSTRACT

In the decades since the end of the Second World War visible similarities have been emerging between higher education systems of different countries, across varying economic, political and socio cultural contexts. Over these years the Ethiopian higher education has also gone through a series of changes influenced by systems of different countries and global trends in higher education. Using institutional isomorphism as analytical framework, this paper explores how the Ethiopian higher education has been changing in the past two decades. Identifying the main forces of change behind the major policy reforms and examining the modes of influence the paper shows how the Ethiopian higher education adapts to global trends. It also makes the case that being under the influence of numerous interests the Ethiopian higher education shies away from strongly demonstrating distinct features of its own.

Keywords: higher education, isomorphism, policy convergence, Ethiopia, global trends in education

INTRODUCTION

Education in general, higher education in particular, is one of the areas where globalization has its pressing effect. Since the end of World War II education systems in different parts of the world –developed and developing, democratic and undemocratic alike - have shown similar trends of growth, though at different pace. Countries enacted education laws and established government agencies responsible for coordinating education; national curricula grew more and more alike in content and structure; and common justifications explained the trends from the earlier conception of 'education for development' to the most recent 'education as human right' (Ramirez, 2006). The whole of Africa has been following these global trends in its developmental endeavors, including in [higher] education. Scholars have observed this development as 'strange' in natural patterns. 'Education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, seemed surprisingly like those of Western societies despite stark differences in the labor markets they served. Schools and curricula looked like resource-poor imitations of those in the West, rather than functional systems adapted to the educational needs of agricultural economies. It appeared strange needs and realities' (Schofer et al, 2012 p.58).

These growing similarities and the dominance of 'global' trends are explained from different perspectives. The resource dependency theory observes that growing similarities are caused by the instinct to survive. Organizations (in this case systems) with less resource control are likely to abide to the demands of, and copy the behavior of the dominant organization (system) that is the source of their needed resources (Nienhüser, 2008). The fact that the developing countries are mainly resource dependent on the West, in the forms of aid and loan, explains why the earlier will have to follow the directions of the later. The world society theory, on the other hand, holds that similarities across societies could be explained as conformity to dominant, legitimated, or 'taken-for-granted' views. Conventional ideas about governance and education could be seen as cultural models – that is, blueprints or recipes that define what is 'normal' or 'appropriate' (Meyer et al, 1997). Another alternative is to explain the same phenomena using the concept of policy transfer which emphasizes that as a collective result of different interactions between systems and their respective actors, policy concepts and practices get to widen their coverage. The manners of transfer may vary from a coercive learning where the copying country (system) has no other viable option, to voluntary learning, where countries deliberately choose to get advantage of the experience and successful achievement of others (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996).

This paper, though, relies on the theory of institutional isomorphism (at a global scale) which holds the view that organizations tend to become more homogeneous because of the relentless change they undergo to adapt to their environment; and that the change mainly takes place through three different mechanisms: coercive, mimetic and normative (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). This theory appears more suited than others to explain why and how the

Ethiopian higher education system is changing because it addresses the voluntary as well as involuntary changes the Ethiopian higher education (the 'institution') had to go through to adjust itself to the various influences of its environment (the world). It helps to explain the nature of relationship the Ethiopian Higher Education has with the general patterns of development in the sector in the contemporary world. It further gives an insight about what the relationship looks like between a developing country such as Ethiopia and the major actors of Higher Education in the third world particularly donors and international organizations.

The Ethiopian higher education in its modern and secular context has a history of a little more than sixty years. Prior to the 1990s the education system was small in size, largely influenced by the socialist system and quite dormant especially at the tertiary level. Following the 1991 change of regime and the overall shift of policies in all aspects, in 1994, a comprehensive education and training policy was issued. Since then series of major reforms have taken place particularly in the higher education sector.

The reform process is complex in that it covered a wide range of issues and involved both internal and external actors. Besides drawing on the experiences of a number of countries and systems, it was influenced by donor countries' agencies, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, international organizations, consultants and higher education institutions of different countries.

Nonetheless, there is a critically limited research explaining the nature of these reforms. This paper, therefore, drawing on literature review and document analysis as its source of evidence, explains why and how these reforms took place. Examining available researches, academic articles, and official documents of the government of Ethiopia and its agencies, the World Bank, UNESCO and other organizations, and using institutional isomorphism as an analytical framework, the paper elaborates what forces (ideals) direct the reform process, who the instrumental actors are, what methods (modes) of influence they use and why Ethiopia is in that position of being influenced. It has to be noted that this study is limited to secondary sources of information and an in-depth research that uses primary data is necessary to give a first-hand account of the reform process and to draw clear picture of the undocumented context and the actual decision making process thereof.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: ISOMORPHISM IN EDUCATION

Drawing on previous works that studied behavior of organizations and how they respond to environmental demands, Dimaggio and Powell (1983) emphasize on the homogenization, than diversification, of organizations. The underlining concept is that isomorphism forces individual organizations in a certain 'population' to adapt to environmental changes, and, by creating a pattern, results in the resemblance of one another. Adopting the changes and following the patterns is not only a response in pursuit of greater efficiency, but it is also a means of legitimization by the environment. In fact an organization is the unit of analysis used in the theory. However the concept is transferable to explain the manner in which systems of higher education (and others) are changing in response to their respective environment.

Education has long been held as one of the idiosyncratic expression of sovereignty and external interference is strongly resisted. However, owing to the emergence of globalization, influence of international organizations and multinational companies, and the shift to knowledge based economy at the global scale; higher education has experienced a substantial degree of global integration. Schofer et al (2012 p.59) note that

'…*variations coexist with clear patterns and trends, such as common assumptions, rules, and fads. Ideas and discourses regarding educational policy institutionalized in the international sphere, for example, may vary on specifics yet embody broadly common assumptions that pervade a given historical period – providing common blueprints that generate conformity among countries*'.

They further assert that empirical researches suggest the top-down diffusion of global models particularly in those countries with strong organizational links to the international sphere.

This process of isomorphic changes, according to Dimaggio and Powell (1983 p. 150-152), comes in three different forms: the coercive, mimetic and normative. Coercive changes are result of direct and indirect influences and pressures from the powerful actors. In the case of Ethiopian higher education bilateral and multilateral organizations, international non-governmental organizations and donor groups are among the major sources of such influence. Mimetic changes happen when countries deliberately copy (or draw lessons) from the experiences of other countries that are regarded as successful in their policies. Having such a small higher education system lagging behind the world in many ways Ethiopia had to learn from the successful experiences and moves by other countries. The normative process of change stems from professionalization. Professional services that come in a form of consultancy and technical assistance, and the increase in the number of professionally trained employees in its institutions, are the most visible ones in shaping changes in the Ethiopian higher education. These three mechanisms are used to analyze how the major changes in Ethiopian higher education system took shape.

HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS IN ETHIOPIA

In recognition of the multiple challenges the Ethiopian higher education system suffered, and its low status even by Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) standard, a series of reform initiatives was launched in the 1990s. The initiatives were mainly efforts to realign the system in order to contribute more directly to the country's strategy for rapid economic growth and poverty alleviation, which appears to be consistent with the 'knowledge- based economy' notion of the world. While there are a number of activities undertaken, in the past two decades, under the general umbrella of the reform agenda, the following are the principal areas of change.

a) Privatization

After moving out of a command economy in early 1990s, privatization was the first major change that happened in the Ethiopian higher education. Though criticized for various shortcomings, the privatization has achieved a considerable result, at least in quantifiable measures. Opened up for private investment in the mid-1990s, the number of accredited private HEIs with undergraduate and above programs, grew from none to 44 by the 2009/2010 academic year, enrolling about 18 per cent of the total student body (Ministry of Education, 2011).

b) Massive expansion

Another typical character of the Ethiopian higher education for the past fifteen years is the massive expansion underway. The expansion in the tertiary level, in recent years, is significant. The amount of investment in the massification of higher education is estimated to have reached as high as 4.2 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Ashcroft, 2010). The Ministry of Education (MOE) launched five new universities by the turn of the century (by upgrading junior level institutions) marking the beginning of this aggressive massification program. By the year 2014/15 Ethiopia will have 33 full-fledged universities compared to only two by the end of the 1990s. Total enrolment has increased from 42,132 in 1996/97 to 192,165 in 2004/05 (MOE, 2005) quadrupling in less than a decade. The annual enrolment growth rate of 50.86 per cent was possibly the highest in the world during this period (Waweru & Abate, 2011). It further reached 319,217 in 2010/11 and is targeted at 467,445 by 2014/15 (MOE, 2010).

c) Cost sharing

Cost-sharing (user fees) was introduced as part of the plan to reduce public spending on higher education and maximize resource utilization. It is assumed that higher rates of taxation to support students out of public funds impair economic efficiency, and hence the alternative is to let individual students pay directly for a service they receive. Upon persistent recommendation of the World Bank throughout the 1990s, the government of Ethiopia introduced user fees in a form of cost sharing scheme in public HEIs in 2003, and subsequently a regulation (No. 91/2003) was provided by the Council of Ministers for its implementation. The Higher Education Proclamation (first ratified in 2003 as No.351/2003; revised in 2009 as No.650/2009), provides that any Ethiopian student studying in a public institution and who is not required to pay in advance tuition fee shall contribute, in cash or in service, to cover the cost of his education. In the new user fees scheme, students in public universities enter an obligation to share the cost of their study, to be paid back in the form of service or graduate tax from future earnings.

d) Financial Relations with the Government

Besides cost sharing, income generation (and diversification of the sources) is another option for public universities to reduce their dependence on government funding. The major change, in this regard, came after the recommendation of the World Bank (2003) citing the good examples of Addis Ababa College of Commerce and the agricultural colleges at Hawassa and Jimma Universities. Consequently, the government has demanded public universities to gradually move away from public funding through mobilizing resources for themselves in different ways, for example, marketizing their research and advisory services and establishing for-profit enterprises. This is evidenced by the provisions of the 2003 higher education proclamation, and later in the 2009 one. Similarly income generation is addressed as an area that requires further improvement both in the third and fourth Education Sector Development Programs [ESDP] (MOE, 2005, 2010). ESDP IV puts it as a target that by 2015 the number of universities that generate sufficient income will be 22 (MOE, 2010 p. 64), though it fails to describe what 'sufficient' means.

Concurrently, the method of public funding was also changed to the block grant format. In accordance with the recommendation of the World Bank's higher education research team in Ethiopia (World Bank, 2003), the higher education Proclamation provides that 'every public institution shall receive a block grant-budget, agreed upon in advance as indicative budget for a five-year period; provided however, that such block-grant budget shall be revised annually' (Article 62.2). This provision, granting the institutions more financial autonomy, also provides them the opportunity to make investments in profit generating activities in support of their income generation endeavor. Yet, it is important to note that the practical application of this provision could not come to effect for the reason that the universities do not have sufficient capacity.

e) Autonomy

The higher education proclamation No.650 (FDRE, 2009) stipulates autonomous, self-managing HEIs that are governed by a board where by administrative and financial autonomy of institutions is balanced by the block grant budgeting system. The World Bank recommends the need for effectively coupling the autonomy of HEIs with an appropriate set of accountability mechanisms such as the use of funding formula in allocating block grants for public universities, and institutionalizing quality assurance both at institution and national levels (World Bank, 2003). By way of accountability and quality assurance, the government seeks to monitor such crucial concerns as access, equity, quality and relevance, and efficient use of resources in public HEIs. In this regard, the government steers public HEIs using regulatory frameworks (e.g., the Proclamation, and Strategic Plan Agreement) and system oversight agencies such as the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) and Higher Education Strategic Centre (HESC).

f) Strategic Prioritization

The development of the ESDP has marked the introduction of strategy led approach to education development in general. The findings of the 1995 and 96 conferences on higher education identified, among other things, lack of clearly defined vision and mission to be the primary problem of the sector (MOE, 1997). This coupled with the recommendation of donors (especially the World Bank) led to the establishment of HESC in 2003. According to the establishing proclamation, the centre has the overall objective of '…formulating vision and strategy in order to make higher education compatible with the country's manpower needs as well as with appropriate policies and with due consideration to global situations to advise the Government on such matters' (FDRE, 2003 Art 86). Consequently all universities were required to develop a strategy of their own which falls within the overall development goals of the country and that of the sector in particular. Later in 2010 the country came up with a brand new blanket development plan called the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) which required the renewal of the missions and strategies of all public institutions to be aligned with the GTP targets.

g) Quality Assurance

Reforming higher education to ensure its quality and relevance has been another focus in aligning the subsystem with economic productivity. The World Bank attributes lack of relevance and poor quality of higher education in SSA in general (World Bank, 2009) and in Ethiopia in particular (World Bank, 2003) to lack of qualified staff, out-dated curriculum, and declining spending and subsequent poor physical facilities (including library and laboratory services). As part of the reform process, in line with the Bank's recommendations, Molla (2012) notes that, the government of Ethiopia has been able to review and update university curricula; introduce new programs in areas of computer science, agriculture, engineering and other science fields; expand graduate level programs; improve pedagogical competence of university teachers through professional development programs; and institutionalize the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) and the National Pedagogical Resource Centre (NPRC) to ensure the relevance and quality of education and training in HEIs.

In addition to those mentioned above the reforms also focused on issues of access, equity and gender balancing. The ministry developed a strategy that focused on increasing the participation level of women both at undergraduate and graduate levels. Similarly the ESPD IV considered the goal of increasing the number of women in academic and top management positions through affirmative action – setting a target of 20 per cent of academic staff and 16 women in top leadership by 2015 (MOE, 2010 p. 64). Hence, a women scholarship for graduate studies has been set up since 2010. The ministry has also launched ICT capacity building program including ICT programs in all universities and the launch of IT graduate and doctoral programs at Addis Ababa University, which will culminate finally by developing a sector wide network that will connect all institutions and concerned agencies (World Bank, 2003).

THE FORCES OF CHANGE

While the Ethiopian government is the initiator and ultimate owner of all higher education reforms that have taken place, there are different internal and external actors who play significant roles in shaping the form and direction of the reforms. Besides the development of the 1994 education and training policy by local experts, Yizengaw (2005) also claims that the initial stages of the reform process, particularly the landmark conferences of the 1995 and 1996, were inclusive of all relevant local stakeholders. In addition to the directly concerned government offices and institutions, representatives of industries and the private sector, community leaders, independent experts, and notable individuals are said to have taken part. Similarly, documenting the preparation process of the overarching Education Sector Development Program (ESDP), Martin et al (2000) listed the major local actors that included: departments of the MOE, social and administrative sub-sector of the Prime Minister Office (PMO), Education Bureaus of all the nine regions and the two city administrations, Institute of Curriculum Development and Research (ICDR), Educational Materials Production and Distribution Agency (EMPDA), Educational Media Agency (EMA), and Teacher Education and Staff Development (TESD).

In parallel, the crafting and implementation of all reforms in Ethiopian higher education has entertained considerable involvement and/or influence of external actors as well. Donors and partners involved in the preparation of ESDP are World Bank, European Commission, the UN organizations UNDP, UNESCO and UNICEF, Swedish government through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Africa Development Bank (AfDB), Government of UK through its Department for International Development (DFID), Government of Finland through its Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Government of Germany through German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ then GTZ), Government of Ireland through Irish Aid, Government of Norway through Norwegian Agency for Development and Cooperation (NORAD),Government of Japan through Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Government of Italy through Italian Cooperation, and The Forum for African Women Educationalists (Martin et al, 2000). It was also observed that there was a strong sense of competition among these actors to dictate the overall direction, which finally culminated in the World Bank assuming the role of coordinating the donor side. Later on reforms related to capacity building involved new stakeholders like the government of the Netherlands and Belgium, and their respective institutions (i.e. development agencies, consultants and universities). However it is important to note that the influences of UNESCO and the World Bank on the Ethiopian higher education in general, and on the recent reforms in particular, are of immense magnitude to the extent that it is difficult to think of the reforms without their involvement.

ISOMORPHIC MECHANISMS OF THE CHANGE

Coercive isomorphic change

Yizengaw (2005) suggests that the Ethiopian higher education reform has been considerably influenced by the 1998 UNESCO conference, the 1999 UNDP Human Development Report and the 2000 publication of the joint task force of UNESCO and the World Bank - *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*. Araia (2004) on his part emphasized on the significant bearing of the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education and its resultant document '*World Declaration and Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development in Higher Education'*, by pointing out how the various articles of the declaration have been interpreted in the Ethiopian higher education reform. Ethiopia as a member of the UNESCO and a participant of the conference has made a commitment to the priorities of the declaration. Besides the declaration had such a wide acceptance that disregarding it would entail the lack of conformity with the world.

Another way Ethiopia has been coerced to follow the trends in world higher education was through preconditions of aid. After all, Ethiopia does not have the financial and expert capacity to undertake the reforms all by itself. The development of the ESDP typically involved a number of external stakeholders, mainly donors. Actually, their involvement was too strong to the extent that the Ethiopian government expressed its frustration about too much requirements as a precondition for assistance and excessively detailed technicalities considered 'interference' in what the Ethiopian government takes as an internal matter (Yizengaw, 2005).

In this regard the World Bank has a strong track record of subscribing policies to developing countries as a precondition for loan. In the 1980s and early 90s the Bank, considering rate of return as a basis of analysis, advocated disinvestment of public money in higher education. Rather it pushed for privatization of the sector so that the government could better focus on the primary and secondary education (Molla, 2012; Collins &Rhoads, 2008). During this period the bank used strict conditionality [and policy subscription] as an instrument of influence to direct the development goals of developing countries to be in line with its own development goals (Pender, 2001). By the end of the 90s the bank formally acknowledged the vital role of higher education in development in the era of 'knowledge-based economy'. It also moved to the use of moderate methods of influence such as negotiation, technical assistance, consultancy and publications.

The World Bank has also used an indirect method of influence on the Ethiopian higher education. Over the years the Bank has been viewed as the most essential actor of the development endeavor in the developing world. It has built such a strong reputation and influence on donors and development agencies all over the world that countries desperately try to get the Bank on their side as if a development initiative that is not supported, or at least endorsed, by the Bank is doomed to fail. Therefore countries are forced to design their development plans aligned with that of the Bank's.

As a country largely dependent on aid and loan as well as assistance of foreign experts, legitimacy is a very important factor for Ethiopia. Therefore conforming to the recommendations and directions of international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank as well as following the interest of major donors is the unstated obligation Ethiopia would have to fulfill in order to secure credibility for effective implementation of its higher education reforms.

Mimetic isomorphic change

In Ethiopia it is common to hear the government defending the relevance and viability of its policies by referring to the countries from whose success it was copied or from whose experiences it drew. The 1994 education and training policy has benefited from the consultation of expatriate experts who came in to the role through partner governments and multilateral organizations. Besides the direct involvement of foreign experts in the process, donors and development partners were invited to contribute to the reform process through a series of consultation sessions (Yizengaw, 2005). This originates from the belief that involvement of expatriate experts and representatives of donor governments would produce the benefit of drawing from their successful experiences. Very often a team of experts travels abroad, particularly to European countries seeking to learn from the experiences of those countries for designing and implementing reforms. It is also common that Ethiopia asks for technical assistance from different countries, which mostly comes in a form of group of experts helping their Ethiopian counterparts. The Ethiopians would be set in a line of succession through on-the-job training form the expats.

When Ethiopia came out of the socialist rule in 1991, it was faced with multitudes of socio economic problems having a very small and backward education system. The new government formed by the ex- guerrilla fighters, was in the typical situation Dimaggio and Powell (1983) would call ambiguity of goals. Hence the most viable and justified thing to do was to learn from other countries that already have a well established system.

Normative isomorphic change

In the normative mechanism of change come two things: the professionalization of the higher education system and the learning from consultancy services. The demand and supply of skilled labor for the higher education system have never met. Even today Ethiopia has a chronic shortage of professionals in the sector. One of the remedies taken in this regard is hiring expatriates to fill the gap. On the other hand, Ethiopia benefits a lot from government-to-government and open-to-the-world scholarships. Its higher education system is being more and more staffed by Ethiopians educated in Europe and North America, who bring in their skills and experiences from those countries where they were trained.

Often times foreign experts, universities, think thanks and research institutions are hired to assist the government of Ethiopia and its institutions in the higher education reform process. In this regard the World Bank takes the lead. Calling itself 'Knowledge Bank' (2003 p. IV), the World Bank provided consultancy services – undertaking research and providing recommendations on higher education of specific countries. More importantly, it used publication, at a large scale, to set the global agenda on higher education as well as to steer direction in specific countries. Beginning with the 1994 *Higher Education: Lessons of experience,* the Bank has issued a number of general, region-specific and country-specific publications. In addition to project based studies and evaluations, the 2003 comprehensive publication of the Bank, *Higher education for Ethiopia: Pursuing the vision,* has had a tremendous influence on the reforms that followed in the consecutive years. The document identified strategic priority areas and provided practical recommendations on how to improve the sector in each area of priority, the implementation of which the Bank itself was largely involved in.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of isomorphic changes of the Ethiopian higher education indicates that the system has been under a continuous influence that comes in different forms. While the Ethiopian higher education has always been changing in a manner it attempts to emulate the system of different countries at different times, the change in the past two decades was by far more visible. After the change of regime in early 1990s Ethiopia opened up itself for market economy and launched its attempt to catch up with the world.

Its reform process is shaped by a number of ways that correspond with the coercive, mimetic and normative mechanisms of isomorphism coined by Dimaggio and Powell. Coercively Ethiopia fell under the influence of the neo liberal ideology through policy subscriptions and conditions for aid and loan. Mimetically it staffed its higher education system by expatriates and foreign educated Ethiopian professionals, and copied from the experiences of other countries. Normatively Ethiopia benefited the consultation of foreign experts, institutions and governments.

However, as much as it benefits, Ethiopia's higher education reform suffers from the confusion of too many interest groups and their respective influences. The desire to secure legitimacy in the eyes of donors and the aspiration of learning from the success of too many countries has led the system in to loss of its own distinctive identity.

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