

Private Higher Education and Regional Inequalities: The Ethiopian Experience

Tilahun Gidey and Pedro Teixeira

Tilahun Gidey is lecturer in the Department of Psychology, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. E-mail: tilahung2000@gmail.com. Pedro Teixeira is director of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies and associate professor in the Department of Economics, University of Porto, Portugal. E-mail: pedrotx@fep.up.pt.

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Until recently, Ethiopian higher education could be characterized as an elite system, with one of the lowest rates of enrollment worldwide. With political changes in the early 1990s, measures were taken to reform education, including the introduction of private education.

RAPID EXPANSION

Over the last decade, Ethiopia has seen a major leap in education enrollment. Access has increased at all levels, with a significant increase in female participation. Between 1999 and 2008, enrollment in primary schools increased

by 237 percent, secondary by 263 percent, and higher education has exhibited the largest proportional increase with a massive expansion of 846 percent.

The private sector has provided a significant contribution to this expansion at all levels of education, notably in higher education. Currently, 56 private higher education institutions are either preaccredited or accredited to offer undergraduate degree programs. The private sector expanded rapidly to attain 16.9 percent of total enrollments in higher education in 2007/08. The pattern of expansion is also observed by the evolution regarding numbers of graduates. The share of graduates from the private sector has moved from 2.4 percent in 2003 to 18.1 percent in 2008.

This expansion is even more striking since private higher education institutions in Ethiopia do not receive any financial support from public sources. Private institutions' funding comes mainly from tuition fees, which are regarded as significant when compared to the country's average family income. The average annual tuition fee in private institutions for degree programs seems to be around US\$231, corresponding to 24.8 percent of the household income of an average family. The financial effort required is also very significant since the level of savings in the country is rather low, especially for rural families.

This financial pressure is particularly relevant since access and equity have been cited in several reports as some of the most serious problems of Ethiopian education. These problems in higher education were expected to be addressed more effectively with diversification, including better geographical coverage. In addition, the development of the private sector was regarded as a positive contribution for regional equality in access to higher education, especially as regards rural areas.

PRIVATIZATION AND REGIONAL COVERAGE

The expansion of higher education has been accompanied by an attempt on the part of the government to establish at least one university in each regional state. Currently, the public higher education institutions are distributed in 8 of the 11 regional states and city administration councils. Three regional states still have no public higher education institution, though these states together represent only 1.6 percent of the Ethiopian population. The high concentration of institutions in the three main regional states is explained partly by the fact that these regions represent more than 80 percent of the country's population. When we look at the private sector, the picture is even more striking (as is generally the case globally). Of the current 56 private institutions, 41 operate in Addis Ababa, the political and economic capital, and the remaining ones are thinly spread across other regions. The limited number of programs in some regions can also be explained by the lack of qualified academic staff or low demand for the institutions' programs.

Although the private sector is highly concentrated in Addis Ababa, several institutions whose headquarters are located there also operate in other regions. Hence, the coverage of the private network is less unequal when we look at these data. These results also suggest that the pattern of expansion is from the capital to the other regional states. On the other hand, more than 85 percent of the institutions offering degree programs in the different regions are located only in the capital cities of those regions.

The first decade of private higher education expansion in Ethiopia indicates that, as in many other parts of world, the private sector's regional

expansion has been mostly determined by market opportunities. Nevertheless, the country's capital seems to be working as the major platform for new institutions to establish their headquarters and that some of these institutions are expanding their activities to other regions. Although private institutions are heavily concentrated regionally, existing room for improvement and policymakers may stimulate a different approach.

It will be interesting to see what stance the regulatory powers will adopt toward the expansion of the private sector and its regional diversification. This is particularly relevant vis-à-vis the more market-oriented institutions, which tend to nurture significant social and political mistrust. Recent signs indicate problems ahead. In late August the government issued a statement that every institution should stop admitting students for distance-education programs and that private institutions are blocked from registering additional students in teacher education and law programs. These decisions were justified on quality grounds, and many private institutions are likely to be severely affected.

CONCLUSION

Like in many other countries, the expansion of the private sector in Ethiopia seems to be moving to a different and more demanding stage. In the coming years, the National Quality Agency is expected to make quality audits in private higher education. This evaluation process will face significant dilemmas, notably via the extent to which the quality system will accept the existence of different types of institutions (or rather to apply similar criteria to all institutions). Since private sectors are often characterized by significant diversity in size, breadth, and academic strength, the impact of those choices will not be trivial for the

development of the private sector in Ethiopia, especially in less-developed regions where access to qualified staff is more limited. The overall coming years will certainly feature increasing tension between the private sector and the government, and it is unclear to what extent regional diversification will benefit from that environment.