

Observations and Reflections of the Higher Education Teachers on the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Ethiopia

Daniel Desta*

Abstract: Higher education in Ethiopia, like it is the case elsewhere, is expected to seek, explain and disseminate knowledge. Beyond this, it is expected to play an active role in the socio-economic and cultural transformation of the society. More specifically, the higher education institutions are expected to produce graduates capable of bringing about change and improvement in the society. There has been serious concern about the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in these institutions. The gap between the societal expectations and the actual performance of the higher education institutions in Ethiopia became a serious concern among many people. The management and teachers of the higher education institutions in the country carried out series of observations and deliberations on the quality of teaching and learning at this level. This paper attempts to examine and explain the reaction of the Ethiopian Higher education Institutions to this situation. In particular, the paper examines the way teaching and learning experiences are organized; the approaches that are adopted; the institutional support made available for the teachers and learners and related issues in the higher education in Ethiopia. Observations and reflections of teachers in selected higher education institutions, statistical reports and related documents are used as the source of data. Observations and reflections of the higher education teachers depict the overall situation of quality of teaching and learning in higher education particularly in government higher education institutions. The participants of pedagogical training programs organized by the National Pedagogical Training for the higher education teachers were requested to write their observations concerning quality of teaching and learning in their respective institutions. The higher education teachers identified several problems that affect quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Dominance of the lecture method, Poor Guidance and Counseling services, Lack of Pedagogical training. Lack of experience and qualification of teachers, Attitude towards education course and teaching, evaluation mechanisms and limitations in the area of research as well as shortage of facilities were identified as problems across most higher education institutions. The paper suggests some actionable alternatives to the problems.

* Assistant Professor, Institute of Educational Research, Addis Ababa University

Introduction

Since the fifties, research in higher education has been looking in to factors that determine active and effective learning. Marton and Saljo in Sweden investigated students' approach to learning in higher education. In this investigation, students were asked to read academic articles, and then to describe what they had learned and how they had gone about learning it. They identified two different approaches with very different outcomes, which came to be called the *deep* approach and the *surface* approach (Marton and Saljo, 1976 in Toohey 1999:9).

According to Toohey, students gain understanding when they have motive to adopt a deep approach to learning. In this approach, students adopt strategies such as reading widely and discussing a concept or topic with others; they seek to make sense of new knowledge in terms of what they already know about this topic and related topics. What makes the deep approach more interesting is that students adopting this approach are not always interested in achieving high marks which is observed as the main motive of students in the Ethiopian schools. The need for learning to be recognized in the form of marks or grades turns out to be an independent factor, called an 'achieving approach' where there is adequate space for understanding. The desire for achievement, as put by Toohey, may be combined with either a deep or surface approach to study. Students who take a deep/ achieving approach will study all of the topics on which they may be examined, try to predict questions and plan their study time carefully; those who are not concerned with achievement will simply follow their interests and let the exams fall out as they may (Toohey 1999:9).

Students adopting a surface approach are primarily interested in meeting the demands for showing passing grades in which the system places upon them. The strategy adopted in the surface approach is to reproduce enough of the information they have been given to satisfy the assessment requirements of a course. Students

often resort to *rote learning* and are often satisfied if they can retrieve what they have memorized, even if they do not fully understand it. Differences were observed among students compelled to adopt the surface approach to learning strategy. Many students who adopt a surface approach are only concerned to pass, but some aim for higher grades. They believe that higher grades will be obtained by reproducing more information, and they may also use study skills to plan and manage their study time (Toohey (1999:10). In a way, the surface approach encourages selective reading.

Research on student learning has also been conducted in other countries. Researchers in the UK and in Australia also carried out an investigation on the ways students went about learning using factor analysis of students' responses to questionnaires on their study intentions and behaviors. The results were remarkably similar to those of the Swedish researchers indicating the consistent differences in the deep and surface approaches (Biggs, 1979; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983 in Toohey 1999:9).

Research conducted on student's preference between the deep and surface approaches of learning shows clear distinction. Some students reported their satisfaction with the deep approach while expressing their regret with the surface approach. One could see that students have tendencies of showing attachment to one of the two approaches. The following statements of students were extracted from (Toohey, 1999:10).

- *I must admit that I do sometimes study more successfully than at other times. I am more successful in my studies if the assignment is challenging and I have to apply my whole mind to it. If, on the other hand, it is a 'busy work' then I find myself thinking about other things and while I might get a good grade I have retained nothing. (Theology student)*
- *Understanding all the concepts behind it,*

that's what I think, is [good learning]. It's not rote learning, it's understanding the full concepts behind things, why things happen, how they are happening, and OK, be able to apply what you know to any kind of question or situation. That's what I think is really good learning.But what I did for one subject, I just memorized a whole set of reactions and then when I came to the exam I think ... when I don't understand concepts behind things, when I'm just relying on what I see in notes and what I've memorized, then I think that's learning badly. (Industrial chemistry student)

- *I've done a lot better the last two years, since I've stopped reading cases, huge waste of time, doesn't work. . . I didn't use them in the exam. I get satisfaction out of understanding something. . . I've gone into a lot of exams knowing things but not really understanding them. (Law student)*

The most important thing to remember about the two approaches to learning is that most people are capable of both. The approach chosen on any particular occasion will be the result of individual characteristics and the pressures from outside. There are two extremes. The first extreme takes the student fully to his/her own way. In such circumstances, the student makes free choice of what to read or try based on his own motives. The other extreme is full submission of the student to external pressure. The pressure that comes from the institutional standard and expectation compels the student to abandon his aspirations and motives? Consequently he/she tends' adopt mechanisms such as rote learning and selective reading to pass examinations.

Whether a student adopts the deep or surface approach in learning in higher education depends on several conditions. The learner's characteristics, the qualities of lecturers, the evaluation systems that prevail, and other factors in the learning environment play an important role. Despite the inevitable nature of interaction among multiple of factors, one can not avoid looking for optimal arrangement for good learning which takes place best when learner is actively involved. Searching for such arrangement needs to be guided consciously and it should be sustained for improving quality in higher education institutions in Ethiopia.

The traditional lecture method in higher learning institutions needs to be examined for its merits and demerits. Alternative methods such as problem solving, action-based learning, capability-based program and learner centered approach need to be explored and get emphasis For good learning to take place. The deep learning strategy should be encouraged with a fair external pressure.

The rationale for encouraging the deep approach of learning lies both in the nature of the learner and the nature of the society. Both are dynamic. The dynamic nature of the society and subsequently ever changing and advancing nature of knowledge; emerging of new demands and problems, unemployment, etc. require diverse thinking, questioning and problem solving approach. Under normal circumstances, the learner is endowed with a tendency and capability to face these expectations. The intellectual, emotional, social and physical maturity attained at the age of college education provides the necessary ground for students' activities.

The Ethiopian society, for that matter even the developed societies, can not afford poor learning in higher education institutions (HEIs). Higher education in Ethiopia, like it is the case elsewhere, is expected to seek, explain and disseminate knowledge. Beyond this, it is expected to play an active role in the socio-economic and cultural transformation of the society. More specifically, the higher education

institutions are expected to produce graduates capable of bringing about change and improvement in the society.

Higher learning institutions are further expected further expected to make significant contributions to the formation of the next generation workers equipping them with the requisite knowledge and generic skills necessary to sustain and develop the national economy. At the Micro level, these same teachers help shape the cognitive, emotional and moral developments of individual adult learners for their multiple roles as citizens, parents and community members (Williams and Fry, 1994, Knowles, 1990 in Fry, Ketteridge, 1999:5).

As put by Lim (2001:6), many factors are responsible for a sustained rapid economic development. Labor force with appropriate skills, discipline and commitment is stressed as a very important factor along this line. Lim further argues that, generic skills of a higher order and different specialized skills, including technical and vocational ones, are acquired through tertiary level education. If programs at the tertiary level are in line with the requirements of the economy, and all educational sectors perform well, the resulting labor force will have most of the skills needed for the economic development.

In Ethiopia, the higher education learners, parents, government and the public in general see this matter as a top priority. Nonetheless, it appears the higher education institutions in the country have long been performing far behind the expectation. There has been a serious concern about the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in these institutions.

The quality of teaching and learning in the country's higher education could be explained in reference to several factors. The way teachers understand formation of knowledge, their knowledge of societal values, teacher's knowledge of the subject matter and their knowledge of the appropriate delivery methods have vital role in determining quality of teaching and learning on the part of the learners. Moreover, the availability and relevance of books, journals,

laboratory equipment, and motivation of the teachers and effectiveness of the management have critical importance in determining quality of teaching and learning that takes in the higher learning institutions.

The gap between the societal expectations and the actual performance of the higher education institutions in Ethiopia became a serious concern among many people. The management and teachers of the higher education institutions in the country carried out series of observations and deliberations on the quality of teaching and learning at this level. Pedagogical training for higher education teachers was among the major observations and deliberations. For long, pedagogical training has not been a requirement for teaching in higher education. Consequently, the overwhelming majority of teachers in higher education institutions in the country did not have pedagogical background by training.

This paper attempts to examine and explain the reaction of the Ethiopian Higher education Institutions to this situation. In particular, the paper examines the way teaching and learning experiences are organized; the approaches that are adopted; the institutional support made available for the teachers and learners and related issues in the higher education in Ethiopia. Observations and reflections of teachers in selected higher education institutions, statistical reports and related documents are used as the source of data.

Observations and reflections of the higher education teachers depict the overall situation of the quality of teaching and learning in higher education particularly in government higher education institutions. The teachers identified several factors that affect quality of teaching and learning in the higher education institutions.

Reactions of HEIs to the Question of Quality in Higher Education

Series of efforts were made along the global UNESCO initiative to address issues of *relevance, quality, management, cooperation and*

other related issues in higher education. The UNESCO initiative to address this matter was given serious attention by the HEIs in Ethiopia. The fall in the quality of teaching and learning was expressed as a common observation and concern of the higher education institutions in the country. The effectiveness of HIEs in contributing to the social and economic development of the society was questioned. Two national conferences were organized to deliberate on the matter in the years 1999 and 2000 by the institute of educational research of the Addis Ababa University. Deliberations of both conferences stressed urgency of the matter and the need for intervention.

The second conference which was held from August 11-12, 2000 passed important decision concerning the mechanisms to address issues of common concern on teaching and learning in higher education. Over 40 representatives drawn from all government higher education Institutions and private Colleges in the country participated in this conference. Establishing the National Pedagogical Resource Center was the main agenda in the conference. A proposal which was developed by the institute of educational research for establishing the center was discussed. The conference participants established the National Pedagogical Resource Center with the aim of contributing to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning in higher education in the country.

The establishment of the National Pedagogical Resource Center opened several opportunities for the HEIs. Since its establishment, the Center has played a notable role. The following could be sited as the major outcome of the Center.

- The National Pedagogical Resource Center became a place for conducting further deliberations on issues of the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. The Advisory Board which is composed of presidents and vice presidents of the HEIs and chaired by the vice Minister of Higher Education and Research had two important

meetings since the establishment of the center. Important issues such as training, networking, forming satellite pedagogical resource centers at each HEI were discussed at length.

- The Center organized three short-term training programs since its establishment. Over ten different modules were developed and used in each training. A total of 150 higher education teachers benefited from the training programs. The training was the first of its kind for most of the participants. The topics covered in the training were new for most of the participants. The topics covered included:
 - Profile of the Higher Education Learner;
 - Ethics of Teaching in Higher Education;
 - Action Research;
 - Curriculum Development and Evaluation;
 - Teaching Methods;
 - ICT for Teaching in HE;
 - Delivery of Higher Education through Distance Learning;
 - Guidance and Counseling;
 - Empowering Women for Learning in Higher Education;
 - Empowering Students with Special needs for learning in Higher Education; and
 - Measurement and Evaluation;

The participants were also required to write a reflection paper based on the training and their observations of teaching and learning in their respective institutions.

- The Center has also played a role in identifying topics of research priorities in higher education. The participants of the training expressed their inspirations and commitment to pursue research on areas identified as priorities.

- The Center is currently conducting higher education baseline research covering both government and private higher education in the country.
- The Ethiopian Journal of Higher Education is also another new initiative. This journal is initiated as a response to the need for research and publications on the growing expansion of higher education in the country.

Observations and reflections of the higher education Teachers

The participants of the three pedagogical training programs for the higher education teachers were requested to write their observations concerning quality of teaching and learning in their respective institutions. This was done side-by-side with discussions on different modules of the training. The higher education teachers identified the following as issues of concern.

A) Lecture method dominates the teaching-learning process

The higher education teachers sited methods of teaching and learning as one of the serious flaws in the teaching learning process. The lecture method persists as a common mode of instruction in colleges of further education and elsewhere.

The methods widely exercised in the higher education, in the words of the teachers, are generally poor. *As the teachers usually focus on giving lectures; students depend primarily on lecture notes; independent learning is not encouraged.*

Lecture methods, if not planned carefully and handled with skill, they endanger learning. Lecturing is said to be a negation of teaching; lecturer is a person who talks in someone else's sleep (Curzon, 1985:191). This method gives more emphasis to the coverage of the content than helping students to learn.

Observations and reflections of teachers in HEIs show that most instructors do not realize the significance of specifying goals of instruction and activating prior knowledge at the beginning of each lecture. Due to lack of familiarity with individual differences among the learners, there is no tendency of utilizing different methods other than lecture.

In the lecture method, a teacher views himself/herself as the sole source of information where as students remain passive listeners to formal and structured presentations. Here, the teaching effectiveness is considered as the sole function of good knowledge of the subject matter.

An instructor from Nazareth Technical Teachers' College attributes this situation primarily to the instructors' long acquaintance with the lecture method. In his words "*All kinds of excuses such as large-classes, students' language inefficiency, lack of necessary facilities, etc.*"¹ are [given] both by teachers and students, Teachers in higher education take lecture method as the feasible method under the prevailing circumstances. Consequently, the learner centered approach which stresses the deep approach to learning appears deemphasized. Problem solving and action-based learning are not given due attention.

B) Poor Guidance and Counseling services

Quite many higher education students need guidance and counseling services for success in their education. The need for such services could be explained with practical examples. For instance,

- many students with rural background find it difficult to easily cope with life in urban centers;

¹ Eshetu T. A reflection paper on ' Active learning in the Teaching of History at the Secondary Schools in Adama Town.

- separation of students from their parents for a longer period and for the first time in their lives often results in homesickness;
- crowded dormitory life and sharing rooms with people having different backgrounds may not be easy for all students; some find it extremely frustrating;
- attending lectures at a college level is a challenge and sometimes frustrating for some students; many are in need of tutorial class arrangements;
- the grading system at college and University level becomes a serious source of worry for quite many students;
- the ethnic tensions observed in quite many HEIs are important source of worries;
- health problem is often a challenge for quite many students. Although, clinics are set up for student health services, the quality of services are often far below satisfactory;
- quite many students attending higher education have economic problems; they have desperate needs for part-time jobs, small grant scholarships, etc.;
- student complaints about services at cafeteria and lounges are overwhelming;
- lack of sufficient books is serious problems in many programs;
- in some cases, students have to be smart to get a place sit for reading in a library;
- quite many girls need protection and safe space in college campuses. They may need special arrangements to fill gaps in their home and cultural backgrounds;
- quite many students do not use effective methods of study.
- students with special needs (e.g. those with visual impairment and motor disorder) need special support (facilities, equipment and guidance services, etc.);
- Student-teacher relationships, in quite many cases, are so formal that the former finds it difficult to consult the latter on academic and related problems;

- Quite many students depend on chatt for reading.

Despite the enormity of the challenges and needs for services, the higher education teachers reported that guidance and counseling services in higher education are extremely poor.

Teachers in any higher education institutions, irrespective of their areas of specialization, are generally expected to provide para-professional guidance for their students. Only few, particularly the complex cases, could be referred to counselors. Teachers have limited consultation hours for their students.

C) Lack of Pedagogical training

Most instructors in higher education institutions in the country have no training on teaching. Those who have undergone pedagogical training are limited to few colleges and faculties.

The outcome of the training organized by the National Pedagogical Resource Center is encouraging. The evaluation of the training by the participants has shown that the training should continue and reach the rest of the Higher Education teachers in the country.

In the last three years, the Ministry of Education has shown high interest and commitment to support the Center. Member Colleges and Universities also showed interest in the training program. At present, some Colleges have already taken measures to establish their own satellite Resource Centers. The efforts along this line need to be strengthened further.

D) Lack of Experience and Qualification of Teachers

The expansion of higher education institutions in the recent years is an opportunity for many citizens who did not have access to tertiary education. It is also a wise strategy in the free market economy. On the other hand, the situation is a challenge for the higher education institutions particularly in terms of ensuring minimum standards and maintaining quality. One of the concerns along this point is quality of staff. Lack of adequate staff in terms of qualifications, pedagogical training and experience is the challenge that the newly emerging higher education institutions face.

The staff profile of some of the newly established HEIs illustrates the problem of under qualification. For instance, HEIs such as the Ethiopian Mass Media Training Institute, Defence Engineering College Maichew Technical College depend on 60.9%, 56.1% and 42.6% on teachers with a diploma qualification respectively. In other cases universities such as Mekele, Jimma, Bahr Dar, Alemaya, and Debu work with 44.8%, 32.4%, 24.4%, 29.6%, 23.9% bachelor degree holders respectively. Further inspection of the staff profile of these Universities reveals that the proportion of the staff who have the qualification of Assistant Professor and above is very low. The staff with the qualification of an Assistant Professor and above in Mekele, Jimma, Bahr Dar, Alemmaya, and Debu Universities is found to be 2.6%, 1.9%, 11.9%, 10.5%, 6.1% respectively (MOE, 2001). From this one could deduce that HEIs in the country suffer from lack of staff with appropriate qualifications and experience.

E) Attitude Towards Education Course and Teaching

This has been one of the serious challenges to the profession of teaching in the country. For years, making an acceptable balance between subject area courses education courses has been a subject of debate. For instance, some extreme opinions claim little or no need for education courses. Knowledge of the subject matter is considered as a sole determinant factor for effective teaching. For many staff, teaching means, in the main, the act of the teacher; and the main requirement for teaching is knowledge of the subject matter. Considering teaching as merely as a matter of knowledge of the content is fallacious. Such understanding excludes the central person, a student who is in reality the main actor. Unless teachers understand and appreciate this, it would be at least difficult to make the teaching-learning process student centered and to encourage the deep approach to learning.

A higher education teacher with the necessary pedagogical training, under normal condition, appreciates the importance of understanding the learner (his/her abilities, interests, priorities, problems etc.) as essential conditions for effective learning of the subject matter. Such understanding of the learner, among other conditions, determines the content and methods of teaching.

Such extreme opinions together with the general societal attitudes towards the teaching profession affect the quality of teaching and learning. The situation has been an obstacle for running strong teacher education programs in HEIs in the country.

F) Issues Related to Evaluation

Measurement and evaluation is one of the crucial elements in the entire teaching and learning process. The two, i.e., teaching and testing are inseparable. They are so closely linked that it is virtually impossible to work in either without being constantly concerned with the other (Heaton in Girma, 2001). The effectiveness of the

application of this understanding in the Ethiopian HEIs appears questionable. Observations and reflections of the higher education teachers show that:

Test and Measurement in HEIs don't adequately serve the purpose they are intended for. Assignment in the form of projects, and term papers are limited in quite many programs. The types of examinations given seem to encourage students to memorize facts. The evaluation practice is generally summative. There is little or no habit of planning a test particularly with the aim of improving teaching.

The primary purpose of measurement in education is to improve learning. In practice measurement evaluation exercises in many programs are poor at least in terms of giving feed back and in motivating further learning.

The explanation for the reported failure in measurement in HEIs lies mainly in the lack of the necessary knowledge in designing, administering, and interpreting tests for ensuring good learning and for decisions pertaining to certification. This situation needs to be improved through organizing short term training for HEIs teachers on the subject.

G) Limitations in the Area of Research

Research and teaching are inseparable. This is particularly very important in HEIs. Through research, a Higher Education teacher improves his knowledge which in turn improves his teaching. Research enables the teacher to learn his/her students, innovative ways of teaching and the teaching profession in general.

Nonetheless, research in higher education particularly on teaching appears limited. To the same extent, the quality of teaching and learning in higher education becomes limited. Observations in various colleges and Universities reveal that the main obstacles to research in HEIs include lack of expertise and experience, heavy teaching

load, lack of funds and journals, etc.,(Adane,2001). These problem need to be addressed to improve the situation thereby improving quality of teaching and learning.

H) Issues Related to Resources / Facilities

The problem of shortage of resources is common almost to all HEIs in the country. The exception could be few, if any. The main problems observed here include, shortage of textbooks and references, laboratory equipment, computers and other instructional aids. This situation has been a serious set back to fully realize the objectives of teaching in HEIs in the country.

What Needs to be Done in the Future?

The overall observations and reflections indicate that the teaching and learning practices in the HEIs do not encourage the deep approach where learners construct their own meaning and understanding which result in lasting change in the learner's behavior. Instead, the surface approach appears predominant.

To maintain quality in higher education, every higher education teacher needs to be equipped with pedagogical skills. Taking appropriate measures such as raising teaching and research excellence through continuous training in methods of teaching, action research, evaluation of teaching and learning are few of the many important measures to consider. Giving the students all the opportunities to make mistakes, look for possible reasons of the mistakes and search for alternative solutions to the mistakes need to be adopted as a strategy. This could encourage intrinsic and primarily self-guided learning on the part of the learners.

It is also important that the National Pedagogical Resource Center for Higher Education is strengthened in order to help all HEI work together to promote quality and efficiency in education. For better and

faster results, the NPRCHE needs its own full-time staff and other resources.

Strengthening the capacity of Colleges and Universities (through training and computer networking facilities) to use electronic media in teaching and to share their experiences and expertise is another measure that needs to be taken in strengthening teaching and learning in higher education.

It is generally advisable that fresh instructors begin to get in to the teaching profession with tutorial work and by assisting the senior staff. This gives them an opportunity to gain experience that helps the fresh teachers to take and conduct classes independently. Arranging short-term pedagogical training for such teachers could also be considered as a helpful strategy.

Designing and implementing attractive salary and other incentives in the higher education, particularly for the government higher education institutions, is among the minimum conditions for improving quality in teaching and learning in higher education. Such a measure helps not only to retain the currently available staff but it would also help to attract qualified and experienced staff from outside.

Reference

- Abyot Nega, 2001. Pedagogical Challenges Among Fresh Instructors: A Case of Mekele University. **IER Flambeau**, Vol. 9 NO. 1. Addis Ababa: AAU Printing Press.
- Adane Tesera, 2001. Assessment of the Profile of Bahir Dar University Teachers. **IER Flambeau**, Vol. 9 NO. 1. Addis Ababa: AAU Printing Press.
- Fry Heather, Ketteridge and Marshal Stephanie , 1999. A handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Educational Practice. London: Kogan Page Limited.

- Girma Abadi, 2001. Evaluation of Training in the Health Science Faculty of Dilla College from the Perspective of Curriculum, Teaching Methodology and Student Evaluation. **IER Flambeau**, Vol. 9 NO. 1. Addis Ababa: AAU Printing Press.
- Curzon, L.B. 1985. Teaching Further Education: An outline of Principles and Practices, 3rd ed. London: Halt-Rinehart and Winston.
- Lim, David, 2001. Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Study of Developing Countries. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Ministry of Education, 2001. Education Statistics Annual Abstract, 1993 E.C./2000-01. Addis Ababa: Educational Management Information Systems, MOE
- _____, 2000. Education Statistics Annual Abstract, 1992 E.C./2000-01. Addis Ababa: Educational Management Information Systems, MOE.
- _____, 1999. Education Statistics Annual Abstract 1991 E.C./2000-01. Addis Ababa: Educational Management Information Systems, MOE
- _____, 2002. Higher Education Capacity Building Program, 2002/03-2005/06 Plan. Addis Ababa.
- Toohey, S. 1999. Designing Courses for Higher Education. Buckingham: The Society for Research in to Higher Education and Open University Press
- UNESCO - Training manual - Guide to Teaching and Learning in Higher Institutions.