

HIGHER EDUCATION TRENDS IN ERITREA

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Abstract:

Higher education has been viewed as a potential instrument of national economic development. Human resource development in Eritrea is important for making the nation self-reliant thus the efforts are exerted to achieve this objective. However, Eritrea has been facing so many challenges in its way to develop its own human resources. The objective of this paper is to delve the current changes in higher education in the country. An attempt is made to highlight what may be termed as tentative issues and lessons emerging from Eritrean higher education. By way of a summing up, some random thoughts are set out to provoke analysis and debate on the subject.

Keywords: Higher education, finance, Eritrea, Asmara University, Human resources.

JEL Codes: A2, I22, I23, I28

Eritrea got its independence in 1991 after thirty years freedom struggle. It is located in the Horn of Africa; a small country with 125,000 square k.m. and has an estimated population of about 4 million. It is also one of the poorest countries in the world with the per capita income estimated at around US\$ 200 and the poverty rate is 66.5 per cent in 2006.

COLLEGES IN ERITREA

Higher education has been viewed as a potential instrument of national development similarly it has the potential to strengthen the economy. Indeed, higher education in the young country like Eritrea can develop manpower for the different levels of economy and is ultimate guarantee to self-reliance. In order to develop education in general and higher education in particular, the Government of Eritrea (GSE) has exerted efforts to develop its human resources after independence. In line with this, University of Asmara (UoA) the only University in the country, has supplied a workforce of about 12,000 graduates from 1992 to 2007 (including 1,505 graduated on 8 September 2007), of whom more than half are graduates at the Bachelor's level are employed with different government and private sectors of the country. The University has been producing medium and high-level manpower that can serve the nation in a better way. Further, UoA has begun Masters' programmes in six different fields in 2004. These programmes are being run through funds abstained from the government and bilateral cooperation agreements; the University consolidated and expanded its undergraduate programmes. The qualitative and quantitative changes in the UoA have resulted in a noticeable upgrading of the trained

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workforce in the country. Currently, the UoA has 260 faculty members with about 120 Ph.D. holders, over 50 of whom are nationals teaching in 43 departments. The UoA has been temporarily closed hence all these staff has been transferred to the Eritrea Institute of Technology and other Colleges. Since the local manpower is insufficient in the higher learning institutions, the Government has hired (on contract basis) about 300 expatriates from India and very few (10) from Pakistan as well. The expatriate teaching staff constitutes about 60 percent in the total teaching staff in the colleges. All the staff both locals and expatriates are full time employees. In 2004, Nakfa 35.89 (\$2.39 million) million has been spent on Asmara University.

Human resource development in Eritrea is important for making the nation self-reliant. So, efforts are exerted to achieve this objective. It is in this sense that investment in higher education becomes more important in the present and as well as in the future of Eritrea. Hence, there has been a rapid expansion in higher education, over the few years. In 2004, there are eight other new colleges were established at the tertiary level in different (administrative provinces) parts of Eritrea. They are: Eritrea Institute of Technology at Mai Nefhi has three colleges namely the colleges of Science, Engineering and Education. The colleges of Business and Economics and the College of Arts And Social Science are temporarily placed in Mai Nefhi are going to be shifted in 2008 to Halhale and Adi Queyh respectively. Other colleges in different locations include the college of Agriculture at Hamelmalo, the college of Marine Science and Technology in Massawa and the College of Health Science and the Orotta School of Medicine in Asmara. All these colleges are offering various degree and diploma programmes in English medium. It is estimated that about 1, 5000 students are learning in these colleges. Out of which about 25 percent complete their graduation and the remaining with certificates and diplomas. All these news colleges are established under the \$ 200 million World Bank loan project.

The UoA established the School of Graduate Studies in July 2004, after two years of preparation, to administer the graduate programmes within various Colleges. This was done after preliminary needs assessment for graduate programmes made in 1995. Thus before 12 years, it was estimated that there was a need to produce for up to 1,000 persons trained at the Master's level. The need for highly qualified workforce at the Master's level at present is consistently increased. Eritrea has been facing a crisis in manpower development. The higher education institutions in Eritrea could not produce students with required skills and knowledge in par with the growing demand.

In September 2004, there are 35 students enrolled in six fields of study: Agronomy, Horticulture, Applied Soil Science, Sustainable Livestock Production, Development Economics, and Organic Chemistry. Of these, 27 are graduated in July 2006. In September 2005 also 35 students were enrolled in the existing fields and out of which 29 graduated with Masters in September 2007. However, there are no students on rolls in 2006. All the programmes at Graduate and Undergraduate level are taught in English medium. As stated earlier, the University of Asmara remain closed since September 2006 with a conviction that it will restart as a full-fledged university with only masters and other research programmes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE MASTERS' PROGRAMME

Although, the UoA has been exerting efforts to supply productive manpower and by increasing the reservoir of relevant knowledge through graduate research, however, the UoA has been facing many challenges. The masters' programme has been launched with specific objectives like:

To provide high-level trained manpower to the nation: To solve the problems of national importance thorough applied research and the generation of new knowledge. For example, Eritrea has problems related to food security, exploration and management of natural resources, economic, social and cultural development, health, gender issues, etc. that can be solved through applied research, but lacks appropriately trained manpower capable of doing research at higher levels. The research-based, graduate programmes have to be designed to enable graduate student to undertake research in areas of national priority. It is believed that the Graduate research may increase the pool of knowledge on Eritrea, and help in meeting the major developmental challenges and constraints afflicting the country. It may also contribute to improve the quality and relevance of education given at all levels in the University and the newly established institutes of higher learning.

To save foreign currency spent on graduate level training in foreign universities: Till 2005, over 17 million USD have been spent on training of over 1,100 Eritreans in foreign universities. Most of these fund donated by the development partners and NGOs. A home grown graduate programme, that will eventually create opportunities for research at doctoral level, will allow the utilization of such funds for building research and educational infrastructure in Eritrea.

To curb brain drain: Brain drain depletes the qualified manpower of the nation and renders the huge sum of foreign currency spent on them a total waste. Out of the total of 1,100 persons sent by the government funds for higher level education, 35-40 percent decided to remain in the developed nations after completing their studies. This has direct negative impact on the strategic development plans of the sponsoring institutions. The graduate programmes will not only save substantial amount of foreign currency spent on graduate training, but aslo help retain trained work force in the country.

The University of Asmara aims at directing its research and training efforts towards addressing the development needs of the country. In the due course of time, the UoA may transform itself from a teaching university into one of teaching and research because, the Graduate programmes combine teaching and research. According to the policy of UoA, to start a graduate programme, a department must have at least a core staff of three nationals with a Ph.D. On the basis of such criteria, the Colleges of Science, Faculty of Arts, College of Social Sciences, College of Agriculture, and College of Business and Economics have started their programmes with limited intake.

IMPLICATIONS

As stated earlier that Eritrea has acute shortage of qualified manpower, there is a desperate need to develop the required personnel for the country. To do that there are three strategic principles like: relevance, quality and sustainability, may guide the implementation of graduate programmes. The principle of relevance implies that the issues and questions that interest Eritrea and its development programmes. These programmes should be meant not only to pursue knowledge per se, but also for solving various socio-economic and scientific problems in the country. Thus, the issue of relevance has to be addressed by involving local stakeholders in workshops that were organized by each College to evaluate their draft curricula. This may enable departments to tune their curricula and research agenda to the needs of the country. The local stakeholders may also contribute to the programmes by making available their facilities to own graduate students.

The second principle is quality. It has to be addressed by involving external linkage partners in the whole process of planning and drafting of the curricula. As far as possible, graduate training has to be envisaged as joint programme between the UoA and partner institutions of higher learning in the North and South (Dutch, Swedish, Indian and South African Universities). The quality of the programme can be pegged to the standards of these institutions. To ensure that the quality is kept to standards as well as to fill the shortage of qualified staff in some departments, each department can be encouraged to invite at least one professor from partner universities to offer courses and to co-supervise graduate students and their research.

Education is free at all levels in Eritrea hence; the principle of sustainability can be addressed through the introduction of student fees. The tuition fees for every student in the laboratory- based and non- laboratory- based disciplines are respectively US\$ 5,000 and US\$ 3,500 per annum. Since the students can not afford to pay the fee, the government may make necessary agreements with the partners and resolve this problem. Furthermore, together with the research centers, the programme aims at generating 20 per cent of their budget through consultancy and contract research. It needs to be stressed, however, that until the graduate programmes reach this level of maturity, they will require budgetary support from the government. But the task is not easy.

Eritrea is educating its people and sensitise them about the imperatives of infrastructure development and the reconstruction process of the economy under the umbrella of *Warsay Yikiallow* Development Campaign. The programmes of higher development should begin with the poor who are strongly aspiring to pursue their education. This approach, in which the poorest amongst the poor receive foremost attention, should become integral to all programmes of higher education and development. There is also a need to improve the efficiency and management of delivery of skilled manpower in all the programmes meant for people's welfare. A very little is achieved in the 16 years of independence but there is however a long way for Eritrea to go in higher educational development.

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