



Public Attitude to Private Colleges in Ethiopia: An Exploratory Survey

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Abstract

The level of satisfaction of an individual or a group is a reflection of the degree to which expectations, wants and needs, relative to a particular event or issue, are being fulfilled. Satisfaction or the lack thereof, affects an individual or a group's willingness to support or endorse people, ideas, institutions, services, or product. In recent years, business, industry, public services, and governments have placed great emphasis on the satisfaction of those using their services and products. They measure satisfaction, they try to raise its levels, and they anxiously pursue their ideas to instill confidence and faith in those they serve. This study intends to explore the attitude of the public towards private colleges. It is designed to measure the level of public satisfaction with the education and training system in private colleges. It is exploratory in nature and is intended to act as a springboard for future research. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data. The data interpretation shows that the sample had somewhat mixed feelings regarding private colleges. Although the majority of the sample still preferred public colleges/universities to private ones, the margin of difference was not exaggerated. This may indicate that the public is breaking away from the lifelong attachment with state-owned institutions of higher learning. Private colleges are essential to diverse and independent education. Thus, it is recommended that private colleges find themselves competitive enough to get the support of the greater public.

1. Introduction

Many changes in the investment arena were brought about in the world with the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. One such development is in education, which has seen the sprouting of private colleges in countries that had strict command economies. Ethiopia has also witnessed such development.

The reasons for this particular development may also be associated with the dissatisfaction of the general public with government-owned institutions of higher learning. For instance, Baskerville (1998: 3) points out that an important factor has been the general dissatisfaction with the pedagogical aspects prevailing in the public

colleges/universities and a desire to use modern teaching techniques. He further explains that one legacy of communism was that quality of teaching was discouraged. Teachers were poorly paid and not provided with any incentive to improve their pedagogy.

It can be said that years of isolation had left teaching methods to base themselves on rote learning, which did not encourage critical or creative thoughts by students or their instructors (Baskerville 1997, 5). The same author recounts his experience in Bangladesh:

In the public universities, not only is there little or no emphasis on good teaching, but also the tenure system virtually guarantees life-long employment. Promotion is usually based on political considerations and seniority, with merit only a secondary factor (Baskerville 1997: 6).

Yet, it goes without saying that for a poor nation aspiring to break away from the jaws of poverty and underdevelopment, perhaps the most critical investment would be training and educating the workforce. There is now increased demand by third world nations for college/university education. Similarly, the private sector is now demanding access to higher education, which has been previously monopolized by the public sector. In agreement, Quddus and Rashid (2000: 2) state that

In the new global economy, the growth of the information superhighway and the revolution in computing and communications have created a huge demand for the so-called “knowledge workers”. The perception is that private colleges/universities are in much better position to react quickly to changes in the market ... and to adapt their curriculum and programs to meet the needs of the labor market.

It is against this backdrop that the current research intends to explore the attitude of the general public toward the private colleges found in the country, particularly in Addis Ababa.

2. Literature Review

Higher education is one of the most important activities organized in modern societies. It creates a demanding but rewarding environment in which individuals may realize their creative and intellectual potential. Through high-level training across the disciplines, it

equips people with the necessary knowledge, skills and values to play a wide range of social roles and to become effective citizens. Through research and the production of knowledge, higher education provides a society with the capacity to innovate, adapt and advance.

In fact, the ability of any higher education system to discharge these functions – to meet people's learning needs, to develop and transmit appropriate skills, and to create relevant and useful knowledge – is a key index of a society's cultural, social and economic vitality and well-being. There is a high correlation, globally, between excellent higher education and overall national achievements in development, growth, competitiveness and welfare.

2.1 Impact of Private Colleges/Universities on Economic Development

It is apparent that with the New World Order, there is a strong desire to produce graduates who not only understand but also have faith in the free market system and in democracy. By their very nature, private institutions of higher learning seem to be better situated with negotiating this task.

2.2 Institution Building

According to Quddus (1993), underdeveloped economies are plagued with the absence of a sufficient number of institutions of socio-economic development. A good college/university acts as a catalyst for social change and economic development.

Graduates with problem-solving skills are in high demand by the private sector. Thus, as Quddus and Rashid (2000: 8) point out, it can be said that *“a mature, well-functioning university, which is faithful to its mission of educating the community (whether the public or the private sector) is an important vehicle of social stability and economic progress”*.

Such kinds of colleges and universities will also help to enhance a body of thoughtful citizens through their young graduates, who will play a crucial role in the creation and dissemination of new technology. According to Quddus and Rashid (2000: 8), a good college or university not only deposits existing data and information but also becomes *“a vigorous participant in creating new information and in disseminating and synthesizing new and existing information”*.

One grim picture of underdeveloped countries is the massive brain drain of trained

manpower in search of better pay. The pernicious impact is even much greater. Private colleges and universities play their part in curbing this problem by providing salaries and working conditions that have attracted a number of expatriate scholars and even foreign academicians. This aspect of private colleges and universities may be taken as their most visible and encouraging measure of their success. In agreement, Quddus and Rashid (2000: 8) state that private colleges and universities “*can effect a significant reversal of the debilitating brain drain that afflicts all LDCs, against which they have been powerless for decades*”.

2.3 The Importance of Private Higher Education

Private colleges are essential to diverse and independent education. There are many practical reasons why we would want to maintain a strong private sector in higher education, such as the economic inefficiencies of government-provided services and the ability to offer certain programs only in a private setting. However, the most important is that an education provided by the government is likely to reflect the beliefs and priorities of those in charge of the political system. Thus, it can be said the only way to ensure a truly independent educational system is through a strong private sector.

2.4 Special Characteristics of Private Colleges

Private colleges, smaller and less encumbered by bureaucracy, are able to respond to changes in market demand more swiftly than public institutions. The private sector, since it cannot rely on tax revenue to survive, is driven to innovate. As Kerr and Ashcroft (1990: 11) conclude, “*overall, private institutions encourage the continuance and further development of a total system that is more competitive, more diverse, more dynamic, and more cost-effective and of higher quality than it would otherwise be*”.

Breneman (1994) has made the case for private colleges. He cites research showing that students at those institutions are more likely to interact with faculty and get involved in college life. Students at private colleges are more satisfied with classroom instruction and faculty-student contacts.

2.5 Economic Efficiency

It is also true for economic reasons that higher education services are best provided by

the private sector rather than by state governments. Buchanan and Devletoglou (1970) analyzed the economic inefficiency of direct provision of higher education by state governments in the context of their discussion of the student rebellion of the 1960s. Their point is that we have created a system in which the vast majority of students attend college for a price that is far below the true cost of providing that service; the service is not sold by those producing it, and the service is not controlled well by those who own the institution at which it is provided.

There are several problems in providing a service at low cost, many of which are analyzed in any elementary economics text. The primary point is that the value to the consumer is less than the value of the resources being used in providing the service. That is economically inefficient, since those resources could have been used to produce something that consumers prefer. At public colleges and universities, clearly students are not charged the true cost of providing the service. Buchanan and Devletoglou (1970: 29) make the point that because students are not charged the true cost of their education, they will have less incentive to make good use of the services of the college and *“the result is that a sizable proportion of university students, under any low tuition scheme, will be placing less value on what they are enjoying than they would place on other uses of these resources”*.

In the case of state-owned colleges and universities, if not all students are admitted that wish to enter, the space available will be rationed on the basis of some set of admission criteria. Those criteria can be set in any number of ways, depending on how closely the legislative branch oversees the college/university system. Slots could be allocated on the basis of estimates of academic performance, such as high school grades, national examination, letters of recommendation, and entrance exams.

Another less obvious result of rationing by other than price is analyzed by Mitchell and Simmons (1994) in their explanation of some of the failings of state-run colleges and universities. They point out that state colleges and universities do not participate in the free market in the way that private schools do; rather, state colleges and universities participate in a process funded by taxpayers and controlled by state officials. The setting of tuition below the market-clearing level allows the professors to collect a *“rent”* in the

form of inflicting non-tuition costs on students. Those include having to endure larger class sizes and having teaching assistants teach the classes so that professors can do research.

In fact, Meiners (1995: 21) seems to have concluded it best when he states the situation in most state-owned colleges and universities: if the teacher happens to be a man of sense, it must be an unpleasant thing to him to be conscious, while he is lecturing his students, that he is either speaking or reading nonsense, or what is very little better than nonsense. It must too be unpleasant to him to observe that the greater part of his students' desert his lectures; or perhaps attend upon them with plain enough marks of neglect, contempt and derision.

Yet, that was written by Adam Smith over 200 years ago. Smith's commonsense solution was to have at least a portion of the faculty member's salary dependent on tuition from his students. The discipline of the market ensures at least some attention to the demands of the consumer. The point is that moving to a market-based allocation of higher education resources, rather than a publicly provided one, will result in a better match of consumer demand and producer supply.

2.6 Why Measure Satisfaction? Why Relate Satisfaction to Expectations?

The level of satisfaction of an individual or a group is a reflection of the degree to which expectations, wants and needs, relative to a particular event or issue, are being fulfilled. Satisfaction or the lack thereof, affects an individual or a group's willingness to support or endorse people, ideas, institutions, services, or product.

In recent years, business, industry, public services, and governments have placed great emphasis on the satisfaction of those using their services and products. They measure satisfaction, they try to raise its levels, and they anxiously pursue that which will instill confidence and faith in those they serve.

The recent move toward greater public accountability in education has moved the education system into the realm of public discussion. Unlike in earlier times, today's public is demanding more information and higher standards. Virtually everyone believes

that the system has to take greater responsibility for student learning, for breaking down the barriers which mitigate against learning and success, and for improving the transition of youth from school to the workplace. Still, there has not been much research done regarding the private colleges in the country, and virtually none in the area of public satisfaction with the education provided by these colleges.

3. Study Design and Methodology

3.1 Conceptual Framework

This study was based on the premise that education is a partnership involving learners, parents, teachers, employers and the community at large, each with their own culture, expectations, needs and desires. Decisions about the education system are made by these groups through mechanisms ranging from political action to the more personal interaction between teachers or instructors and learners. This range includes decisions related to hiring by employers, decisions on curricula by educators, decisions on resource allocation by administrators and decisions related to the choice of educational institutions by parents and students. It would be fair to assume that the basis for many of these decisions is one's personal level of satisfaction with the system, in general, and the level of satisfaction with particular aspects of the education and training system. Decision-makers are also influenced by the levels of satisfaction of constituents as expressed to them. Any system of satisfaction indicators should, therefore, include two components. One component should determine what expectations people have for the system, the other should assess satisfaction with the system to ensure continuous improvement.

The general public and parents

Of particular significance to any indicator system, whether provincial or national in scope, is the satisfaction level of the public relative to educational outcomes. Public perception may make or break a system. If the public is not satisfied that the system serving it is adequate then one of two things need to be done. Measures could be taken to better inform the public so that they are more aware of the progress being made, or changes could be made within the system so that it is better able to meet the needs of the public.

In spite of what some believe about the independence of postsecondary students from their parents, a more educated parent group and the inevitable financial involvement of parents in the lives of their college and university level children have put parents in the forefront as a client group of the postsecondary system.

3.2 Survey Population

Given the detail of analysis that was desired, it was necessary to survey a broad sample of the general public. However, because the study is supposed to be an eye-opener and a pointer toward further research, a small but representative sample was selected. It was decided that 90 completed surveys would be required. Sample details are outlined in table 1. Out of the 90 questionnaires, 70 were filled out and returned to the researcher. Thus, the analysis and interpretation were based on those surveys.

Table 1: The Respondents

| Group | Postsecondary Sample (% of total respondents) |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Parents | |
| Gr. 7-12 children | 48.8 |
| Public college/university children | 20.7 |
| Private college children | 18.9 |
| No children | 6.4 |
| | 2.8 |
| Education | |
| Less than high school | |
| High school diploma | 3.8 |
| Some postsecondary | 17.8 |
| College diploma | 10.9 |
| University degree | 9.5 |
| | 6.8 |
| Unemployed | 23.2 |
| Govt./Public servants | 15.0 |
| Students | 10.2 |
| Postsecondary | 8.7 |
| Other | 1.5 |
| Employers | 2.8 |
| Gender | |
| Males | 36.0 |
| Females | 64.0 |

4. Discussion of Findings

What Are the Main Purposes of Postsecondary Education? Postsecondary education serves a number of different purposes, usually represented by the different types of programs in which students enroll and by the different types of institutions they attend. Normally, there cannot be one specific priority for postsecondary education. For the purpose of studying the priorities of postsecondary education, the university and college sectors were separated, and respondents were asked to specify how important they felt certain goals or purposes were. A range of purposes were presented, and the respondents, in addition to indicating importance, indicated their level of confidence in the attention being given to those purposes they deemed important. The questions were:

How important would you say it is for private colleges to focus on:

a) providing students with a broad range of general education?

b) providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to pursue their chosen career?

c) providing students with the education they will need to get a job in their own province only?

a) to e) above

There was a third question about each of the sectors, which was included to show the level of priority given to each purpose, which asked:

Thinking about the purposes of private colleges that we just discussed, which would you say are the most important purposes?

The most important reason for pursuing education in private colleges was considered to be the need to provide one the opportunity to pursue a career of choice (by 84% of the respondents). This was followed relatively closely by the need to provide skills which would help one compete nationally and internationally (by 75% of the respondents). Regarding confidence in the focus of these private institutions toward career-oriented education, 48% of the respondents expressed their confidence that private colleges are focusing on this major goal of preparing their graduates for careers. This rather not so good a percentage may be indicative that the public is not yet satisfied with the job-creating ability of the graduates from private institutions. It should not be forgotten that the communist mentality of being allocated to different posts after graduation is not yet over with most of the public. Thus, many graduates still find it difficult to start as young entrepreneurs on their own or in groups with other graduates. Thus, the private institutions would do well if they were to concentrate on such courses that would sharpen the entrepreneurial skills of their prospective graduates.

How Good Does the Public Think Postsecondary Education in Private Colleges is? Like in the above questions, there was an attempt to ask questions which would provide a reasonable proxy of overall satisfaction and confidence with the system:

Students are often given grades of A, B, C, D, or Fail to indicate the quality of their work. If you were to grade the quality of postsecondary education in private colleges, what grade would you give to them?

The responses were quite revealing in that the respondents seemed quite undecided. That is, 25% of them gave a B grade and 32% of them gave a C grade. Only 5% of the

respondents gave an A grade and 8% of them gave an F grade. The rest 30% gave a D grade. Thus, if we sum up the A's and B's, they come up to 30%. The D's and F's come up to 38%. We may leave out the C's (32%) since they represent the middle ground. It can, therefore, be said that the greater number of the respondents are not satisfied with the education being provided by private colleges. However, the small margin of only 8% is indicative that at least the colleges are on the right track.

In all of the above proxies of satisfaction, the public colleges tended to be rated a bit higher than the private institutions. To the question which asked:

If you could choose any postsecondary institution for you or your children, what type of postsecondary institution would be your first choice, public or private?

The responses were as follows:

- 1 Public College 60.7 %
- 2 Private College 39.3 %

This information raises an important issue which may have implications for the private postsecondary system. The fact that the public postsecondary institutions are by far the first choice of the respondents, as the place where they would prefer themselves or their children to pursue education, might imply that the private college and trade systems are not selling the value of their programs very well.

What Are the Greatest Problems Faced by Postsecondary Students and Institutions? In the postsecondary system, there are distinct problems which are faced by students and other problems which are faced by the institutions themselves. Thus two different problem questions were posed as follows:

What do you feel is the main problem(s) facing postsecondary students from private institutions?

With respect to the respondents' view of the problems facing students, the two problems below clearly stood out from the others.

- 1 Lack of Jobs (75% of the respondents)
- 2 Cost of Education (62% of the respondents)

Is the Public Satisfied with the Attention Paid to General Employability Skills of

Postsecondary Graduates from Private Institutions? Employers and others place great emphasis on the whole area of personal attributes, knowledge and skills which affect employability and workplace success. A list of six general attributes (see Table 2) which tend to be valued in this regard were presented to respondents, who were asked two questions -- one related to importance and the other related to satisfaction. The list was presented with the following questions with the results shown in Table 2:

How important is it for the private college system to prepare graduates to.....?

How confident are you that the private college system adequately prepares graduates to.....?

All of the qualities presented were considered very important to students when they graduated from postsecondary, but the percentage of those that were highly confident that these skills were being dealt with was quite low. However, if both the very confident and somewhat confident were added together, the vast majority were satisfied with the emphasis. Interpreting this information would be influenced by how competitive and effective the system wants to be in addressing these areas. If the system would like the majority of people to be very confident in the system's ability to address employability skills, a good deal of work would be needed in the area of communication and public relations.

Table 2 gives the details of the public's responses to the importance and the level of confidence they had that the private college system is meeting the needs of graduates in this area.

Table 2: Employability Skills of Postsecondary Graduates

| <i>Employability Qualities</i> | <i>Importance</i> | <i>Satisfaction</i> | |
|--|-------------------|---------------------|------|
| How important is it for the private college system to prepare graduates to ... How confident are you that the private college system adequately prepares graduates to ... | (%) | VC (%) | SC |
| 1. Communicate effectively? | 98.2 | 17.9 | 56.2 |
| 2. Use technology, instruments, and information systems effectively? | 98.5 | 24.3 | 58.1 |
| 3. Plan and manage time, money, and other resources to achieve goals? | 95.7 | 17.8 | 45.6 |
| 4. Identify and suggest new ideas to get a job done? | 96.2 | 17.8 | 52.5 |
| 5. Plan and make decisions with others and to support the outcomes? | 95.4 | 19.3 | 54.0 |
| 6. Use effective job search skills? | 97.4 | 22.1 | 52.3 |

(VC = very confident and SC = somewhat confident)

What is the Public Attitude toward the Private College System? Is the public satisfied with the approach to issues of private colleges' education? The following two questions

were posed in this regard:

- 1 Are private colleges good for postsecondary education?
- 2 Are private colleges bad for postsecondary education?

Accordingly, 62% of the respondents agreed that private colleges are good for postsecondary education, while 23% agreed to the opposite view. The remaining 15% were undecided.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

What is the Overall Level of Satisfaction with the Private College System? The overall level of satisfaction with the private college system is relatively high. It can be said that on the surface, it appears that there is not a high level of satisfaction with the way things are presently organized and the extent to which they meet student need. There is agreement that the existence of private postsecondary institutions is good for the overall system, yet on other questions in the survey, the private had less support than the public system. There are clear areas of concern which will need to be addressed by policy and decision makers responsible for the private college system. It is important that public concerns be addressed. It is important that in areas where the public is clearly unaware of the programs and services available, a better method of public communication be considered.

Considering together the various items which were intended to give an overall picture of effectiveness and quality as perceived by the public, the high esteem held for the private colleges is clear. This belief in private college education is perhaps the reason why many people feel that there is a need for more private colleges in the country. Concerns were raised, however, in the areas of system funding, overcrowding, quality of some programs, as well as in the area of student financial assistance and job prospects for graduates. There were also some serious issues raised with respect to private college education and training. This study of public expectations and satisfaction clearly indicates a need to take a further look at private colleges.

Role of Employers

Employers are a driving factor in how postsecondary education is structured and delivers educational programs. The qualifications employers seek in their employees in many respects dictate what postsecondary education must provide in many fields. Employers seeking specific knowledge and abilities help formulate our curriculum and expectations for outcomes. Employers' demands for employees who can think creatively, make responsible decisions, communicate clearly, represent themselves well within the community and provide a broad, international perspective set the stage for strong liberal arts and general education programs that develop the whole person. To serve their students well, private colleges need to understand and address the needs of employers. This requires communication and cooperation between employers and educational leaders.

An ongoing dialogue between employers and private colleges is necessary if students are to excel in their chosen careers; if current and future businesses are to be competitive in an increasingly complex national and worldwide economy; and if the state is to emerge as one of national and international multi-industrial strength. Ideally, employers would work with private colleges to address mutual issues such as training assessment, on-the-job training, financial aid programs that enhance access to education, changing technology, and the impact of internationalization on education and business.

Increasingly our businesses will operate and compete on an international basis. If they are to be successful, it is important that they understand the economic, political and societal systems of other countries. Employees with international perspectives and the ability to effectively communicate in foreign languages will be in high demand. To meet this demand, businesses will turn to postsecondary education as a primary source of such employees. If our country is to continue to thrive economically, it needs entrepreneurs who, by creating new businesses, invest not only in their own future, but in the future of Ethiopia as well. Many more new businesses fail than succeed, however. Often, the cause of failure is people who are unprepared educationally to succeed as entrepreneurs.

Private colleges and employers need to work together to prepare students for success as employees or entrepreneurs in an increasingly internationalized business world. There are situations in which employers become educators themselves, providing apprenticeship

programs and other types of on-the-job training. They may believe that they have a better understanding of their needs and are better prepared to teach their specific training needs. They may be unaware of the potential or opportunity for customized, cooperative training programs between business and education, or believe, erroneously in many cases, that it is more cost efficient for them to provide the training themselves. Whatever their reasons, employers may become educational competitors. Competition between employers and educators can be healthy, generating creative initiatives and spurring vitality on the part of both educators and employers. However, the need for such competition could be considerably lessened if business and postsecondary education understood each other better. Too often, there are not sufficient bridges between the worlds of business and education. Increased communication between the employers and private colleges will lead to cooperative and collaborative initiatives that benefit business, education and the citizens of the state.

In Closing

How satisfied is satisfied enough? Are there standards associated with satisfaction and confidence which allow the system to know if it is doing well enough? Neither of these questions have any definitive answer at the present time. Thus, any attempt to say something about the overall level of satisfaction with education must be seen in light of the elusiveness of the psychological construct "*satisfaction*". Nevertheless, there would be no purpose of studying the level of public satisfaction with education, if the information could not provide some general direction to those who are involved in planning and policy of private colleges. Only the general results, as solicited from the full sample of respondents, are presented in this paper. From this it is evident that there is support for the private education and training system in the country. However, the results from the sample also show some points where there is some dissatisfaction with some aspects of the private institutions of postsecondary education. Thus, these aspects need to be addressed by the decision-makers of the institutions.

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