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The Role of Private Higher Education Institutions in Student Readiness for Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examined the role of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in students' readiness for Higher Education (HE) in Addis Ababa. It attempted to identify the practices in and collaboration between Preparatory Schools (PSs) and PHEIs in producing HE-ready students. To this effect, data were collected from randomly selected 15 PHEIs, five PSs and a board member of the Private Higher Education (PHE) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Institutions' Association through questionnaire and interview. The results show that apart from the fragmented and minor efforts made by PHEIs after students joined the Higher Education (HE), the sector has a long way to go in assisting PSs to produce HE-ready students. The link between PSs and PHEIs appears missing. However, PHEI leaders believe that student readiness should be part of their institutional responsibilities and they need to collaborate with PSs to ensure that students join HE well-prepared.

Background

Despite its young age, the Ethiopian PHE has proliferated rapidly and contributed tremendously toward the production of trained human capital. Coming into scene fourteen years back, following the issuance of Higher Education Proclamation 351/2003 that opened the door for private investors to invest in this particular sector, its intake reached more than 24% of the

overall HE intake in less than five years (Wondwosen 2008; Teshome 2007). This figure, however, declined to 17% in 2011 (MoE 2011).

The PHEIs, unless fall short of space, admit all applicants that meet the minimum cut-off-point in the Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Examination (EHEEE), as set by the Ministry of Education. Most of the students who go to PHEIs are the ones that are not assigned to public universities due to, comparatively speaking, their lower GPAs in the EHEEE. However, students who high scores in the EHEEE and are have assigned to public universities located in remote areas make private HEIs their choice. Because PHEIs largely admit students with lower GPAs in EHEEE, without any competition, there were doubts and biases on the quality of their graduates. The sector was once considered “diploma mills” (Wondwosen 2008). The findings of a study on the performance of graduates conducted three years back by Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance (HERQA) (HERQA 2009) reported contrary to this assumption. The report states that there is no significant difference between the performance of the graduates of public and private HEIs.

The bias against the private sector is changing. The Ethiopian government seems to recognize the role of the sector in the development of human capital. Lifting the ban on distance education can be a case in point. Following HERQA’s one-year-long evaluation of the provisions of distance education across Ethiopia, the Ministry of Education took a decision which disregarded the private-public dichotomy allowing six PHEIs that were found to be of good quality to resume offering distance learning. In addition, in 2011/2012, the Ministry of Education’s cut-off-point for entrance to HE considered the private sector and allowed about fifteen thousand students to study in PHEIs in the regular program.

Considering the number of students coming from PSs and the limited intake capacity of public HEIs and the government's recognition to the PHEIs' contribution in the area, the future looks bright for the sector. PHEIs are likely to enroll much more students than they used to. This implies that PHEIs need to proactively engage in student readiness. As stipulated in the Higher Education Proclamation, the sector is expected to give back to the society. Assisting students to get prepared for HE while they are at PSs is one aspect of discharging their social responsibility. Also, to ensure the sustainability of the sector, as business enterprises, PHEIs should work hard to win trust both from the government and the public at large.

The problem

There is high dissatisfaction amongst HEI instructors regarding students' readiness for HE - the level of preparation students need in order to enroll and succeed in HE within a given time and without remediation (Conley 2003 and Spence 2009). According to Mulu's (2009) finding student performed below expectation. Student readiness includes students' cognitive strategies, their academic behavior and the educational and personal experiences they acquire to live up to the standards, expectations and demands of HE (Conley 2007). Students joining HE are said to lack basic English language, reading, critical thinking and analysis and writing skills, which are essential for their success in HE.

Despite some attempts, there is lack of strategic and precise ways of avoiding the public-private dichotomy. The PHEIs were ignored in the plan of human development, particularly in HE (MoE 2010 and MoFED 2010). The amended Higher Education Proclamation (650/2009) clearly states that "The Ministry [of Education] shall consult the public institutions concerning

student placement so long as the current centralized placement of student in public institutions shall continue.” A similar attitude seems to prevail in the minds of the people as well. Preparatory School (PS) students and parents prioritize from among the public HEIs when making HE choices. They would consider PHEIs after they exhaust all the means to join public HEIs. PHEIs should make the government and the people’s overreliance and trust on public HEIs turn into the private sector through proactive engagement in tasks that demonstrate diligent and effective discharge of responsibilities. Student readiness is one of the major concerns, which determines the kind of graduates PHEIs would produce at the end of the day. The well-prepared students they admit, the better qualified and competent graduates they are likely to produce.

As Coy-Ogan (2009) recommended, “Students need current, realistic information about the array of postsecondary options and their individual likelihood for success in particular fields”. For McDonough (2005), informing students about HE from at least grade eight onwards will help them make appropriate high school course decisions and develop solid postsecondary aspirations.

Ethiopia seems to have no option other than ensuring students’ readiness for HE to produce highly qualified graduates, which is a joint responsibility of HEIs and PSs. The HE, which appears to be better positioned in terms of resources (both human and material) than PSs, has to be forth coming to ensure the production of HE-ready students.

For Ethiopian PHEIs, in particular, which are entirely tuition-dependent, student readiness is both a responsibility and an assurance of

sustainability. It is expected that PHEIs give back to the community and one way they can contribute toward the betterment of the community is enhancing students' success in HE, which heavily depends on their readiness for same. Working on student readiness is, therefore, essential. Viewed from business perspective as well, PHEIs can make their presence felt, demonstrate their commitment to quality education, win trust and credibility and thus ensure the sustainability of the business through engagement in student readiness activities. This includes creating opportunity for HE staff to know about what is happening in PSs, designing and implementing need-based support system for PSs, and making PS students know about HE programs, delivery and assessment, course requirements, and the knowledge, skills and attitude expected from them. This, however, seems to be a missing element in the education sector. This paper, therefore, attempted to look into the role PHEIs played in student readiness for HE.

Research questions

The main objective of this research was to examine the role of PHEIs in student readiness. To this effect, the following basic questions were set.

1. To what extent are PHEIs involved in the process of student readiness for HE?
2. Is there a link between PSs and PHEIs that is geared toward student readiness?
3. Do PHEIs believe that student readiness is part of their responsibility?

Objectives

The main objective of this study was to examine the role played by PHEIs in student readiness. The specific objectives included:

1. Finding out the extent to which PHEIs engage in student readiness activities
2. Examining the link between PHEIs and PSs to ensure student readiness for HE
3. Finding out if PHEIs believe that they have the responsibility to assist PSs to produce HE-ready students

Methods

In order to see how much PHEIs engage in student readiness activities while students are at PSs and the collaborative efforts exerted by PHEIs and PSs toward producing HE-ready students, data were collected using two sets of questionnaire and structured interviews. The questionnaire was distributed electronically and in hard copies to 20 PHEIs and 10 PSs located in Addis Ababa and the suburbs. 15 (60%) PHEIs and five (50%) PSs completed and returned the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of close- and open-ended questions.

To increase the reliability of the information obtained through the questionnaire, interviews were held with nine of the PHEI leaders and the Deputy Chairperson of the PHE and TVET Institutions' Association all of whom completed and returned the questionnaire. Whereas seven of the interviews were done face-to-face, the remaining took place through telephone. Five of these interviews were recorded following the respondents' consent. Attempts made to interview PS leaders were not successful.

The institutions and schools were selected using simple random sampling technique. The data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Literature

Definition of student readiness

Student readiness for HE, within the context of this study, refers to, as Conley (2003), Lemmens (2010), and Spence (2009) defined it, HE-entering students' level of preparation to enroll and succeed in the undergraduate program of HE within a given time and without remediation. This includes students' academic achievement, behavior and the educational and personal experiences they have acquired to live up to the standards, expectations and demands of HE (Conley 2003, 2007). Conley (2007) stated a HE-ready student is expected to have understanding about HE course expectations and the academic culture and structure, and demonstrate competency in HE courses. A HE-ready student is supposed to have "both the mindset and disposition necessary" to succeed in HE (Conley 2007, 5-6).

A HE-ready student is assumed to:

understand what is expected in a college course, can cope with the content knowledge that is presented, and can take away from the course the key intellectual lessons and dispositions the course was designed to convey and develop. In addition, the student is prepared to get the most out of the college experience by understanding the culture and structure of the postsecondary education and the ways of knowing and intellectual norms of this academic and social environment.

HEI responsibilities in student readiness

Reporting findings that showed significant difference in students' dedication to study time over five years (from 2004 to 2009), which declined as time went by, James, Krause and Jennings (2010) recommended that

students should be encouraged to be part of the solution as their engagement and academic progress determines the outcome. HEIs should clearly spell out their expectations so that students could act accordingly (Ibid). In addition, they suggested, HEIs should set academic standards that can lead students to success and create awareness about same before students leave their respective schools.

Venezia et al. (2003), on their part, suggested that HEIs should provide students, teachers and parents with “accurate, high quality information about, and access to, courses that will help prepare students” for HE expectations and standards (Venezia, et al. 2003, 2). They also suggested that HEIs need to analyze the relationship between the content of postsecondary education placement exams and K-12 exit-level standards and assessments and provide students with information about their level of preparation before they leave their high schools (Ibid). According to Venezia et al, there should be standardized ways of compiling and sharing data about students. Kuh (2006) added that HEIs should not only provide students with orientations on student success keys, but they should also put in place a system that keeps students updated of their progress. According to Excellencia in Education, HE leaders are expected to “implement high impact practices with proven benefits to increase student learning outcomes, measure progress in student preparation, access, persistence, and degree attainment, and guarantee need-based aid for qualified students” (2011, 4-5).

In sum, student readiness should always be high on the HE agenda and HEIs should take the responsibility to ensure that schools produce HE-ready students. This can happen if the education sub-sectors work together and ensure alignment of contents and assessment across the education ladder (Conley 2007).

The practice

The experience in the USA looks bizarre due to the missing link between HEIs and schools.

The current fractured systems send students, their parents, and K–12 educators conflicting and vague messages about what students need to know and be able to do to enter and succeed in college. For example, high school assessments often stress different knowledge and skills than do college entrance and placement requirements. Similarly, the coursework between high school and college is not connected; students graduate from high school under one set of standards and, three months later, are required to meet a whole new set of standards in college (Kirst and Venezia, 2006, 3).

The above statements show a disconnect between HE and schools and the consequences of the disjunction, which affects students' preparation negatively. Conley (2003) also asserted that the link between HEIs and schools is non-existent.

Research has documented that the way students are taught plays a vital role in their success. Esayas (2001) denounced that the one-way dominated teaching in Ethiopian HE denied students' the opportunity to think critically, interact, and build confidence; the exams were of types that encouraged rote memorization thus creating no space for critical thinking and analysis. The skills the HE requires seem missing. This situation can be improved only when the HE sector keeps itself updated of what happens in schools and work towards its betterment.

Implications for PHEIs

The above statements send a clear message to PHEIs that a wake-up call ringing for them to identify students' needs while they are in PSs and availing the support that fit their needs is urgent and necessary in order to maximize students' success in HE and institutions' own achievements.

Results and discussion

In a bid to identify the roles of PHEIs in student readiness in the context of the Ethiopian education system, data were collected through two sets of questionnaire and structured interviews whose findings are discussed hereunder.

No of respondents																			
by qualification						by service in their current position in the institution						by overall leadership experience in the sub-sectors						Total	
BA/ BSc		MA/ MSc		PhD/As sist. Prof		1-5 years		6-10 years		>10 years		1-5 years		6-10 years		>10 years		PHEIs	PSs
PHEIs	PSs	PHEIs	PSs	PHEIs	PSs	PHEIs	PSs	PHEIs	PSs	PHEIs	PSs	PHEIs	PSs	PHEIs	PSs	PHEIs	PSs		
0	3	12	2	3	0	2	5	9	0	4	0	1	3	10	2	4	0	15	5

Demography of respondents

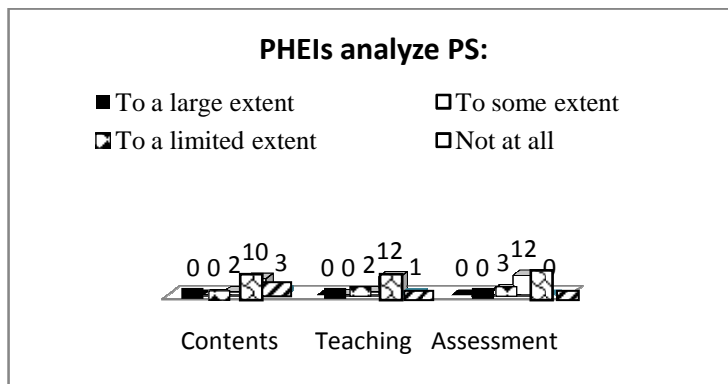
All respondents were the highest decision making authorities in their respective institutions and schools. As can be seen in the above table, the majority (80%) of the sample PHEI leaders are MA/MSc holders. The remaining (20%) were PhD holders or Assistant Professors. On the other hand, of the five PSs that participated in this study, three of the directors were BA graduates and the other two had MA/MSc. With regard to service in their current position (during the study period), 86.67% of the sample

PHEI leaders stayed in their leadership positions in their respective institutions for more than six years. The respondents from PSs worked as leaders in their institutions for the last one to five years. Many of the respondents had additional leadership experience elsewhere but in the same sub-sector. 93.33% of the PHEI leaders had more than six years of overall leadership experience in HE. The rest of the respondents led HEIs for less than five years. While three of the sample PS leaders had between one and five years of overall leadership experience in PSs, two of them had between six and ten years of experience.

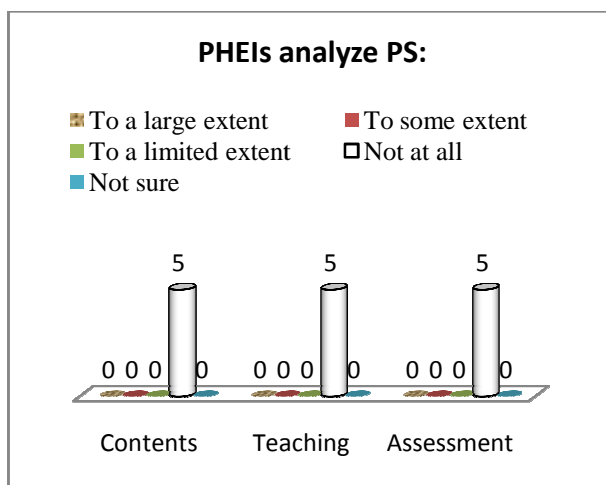
The data indicate that PHEI leaders are better qualified, have better leadership experience and stayed longer in their leadership positions, which must have equipped them with sound understanding about the trend of student readiness for HE over the years. Given the fact that PHEIs are better in their resources, more is expected from the sector to contribute to the production of HE-ready students.

Graph 1: Respondents’ views about PHEIs’ effort to analyze PS course contents and teaching and assessment practices

PHEI leaders’ responses



PS leaders' responses



The above graphs show responses given to a set of questions which asked study subjects whether PHEIs make analysis of PS course contents and teaching and assessment practices whose findings would have enabled PHEIs have knowledge about things happening in PSs and thus design and develop strategies on how to support PSs to produce HE-ready students. The majority of the respondents from the PHEIs and all of the respondents from the PSs indicated that PHEIs made no attempt to engage in the analysis of PS course contents, the teaching and learning process and the assessment practices. This was confirmed in the responses given to the open-ended questions and during interviews. Apart from the hearsay evidence about PS teaching and assessment, which, they said, mostly focus on rote memorization, all the interviewees from the PHEIs unanimously confirmed that their institutions never put any effort to analyze the PS course contents and the teaching or assessment practices. Three of the interviewees were even sure to conclude that no single PHEI in Ethiopia would engage in this task. This connotes that

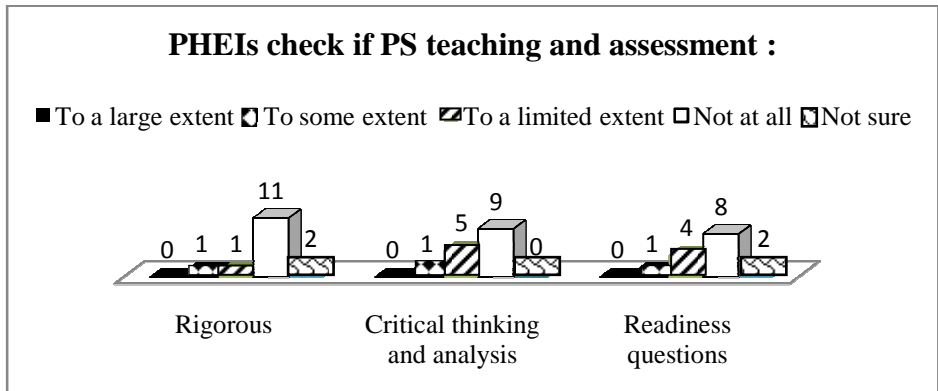
PHEIs teach students they have no idea of, merely led by assumptions about the knowledge and skills their students might have.

Asked to reflect on their observations about students' readiness for HE, respondents aired out mixed feelings. In the open-ended question and during the interviews, many of the respondents said, most students lack proper readiness for HE. Some of the respondents underlined the fact that they had well-prepared students although they were few in number. Although all of them underscored the need for an empirical study to label students' level of readiness, they all were bold enough to assert that the quality of students over the years has declined. Respondents were also asked whether PHEIs should study what goes on in PSs in order to respond to the need for action to produce HE-ready students, eight (including the Board member of the PHE and TVET Institutions' Association) of the interviewees said they should do the study while the other two said that this was out of their mandate.

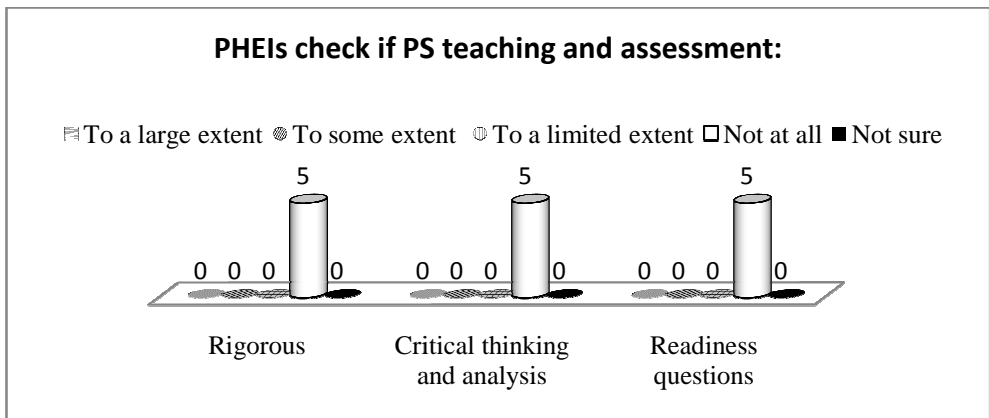
It looks that there is a general consensus on the need for PHEIs to look into PS contents, the teaching learning and the assessment to provide the support PSs might need in the production of HE-ready students. Student readiness is a concern receiving no attention from PHEIs.

Graph 2: Responses obtained about the nature of PS teaching and assessment

PHEI leaders' responses



PS leaders' responses



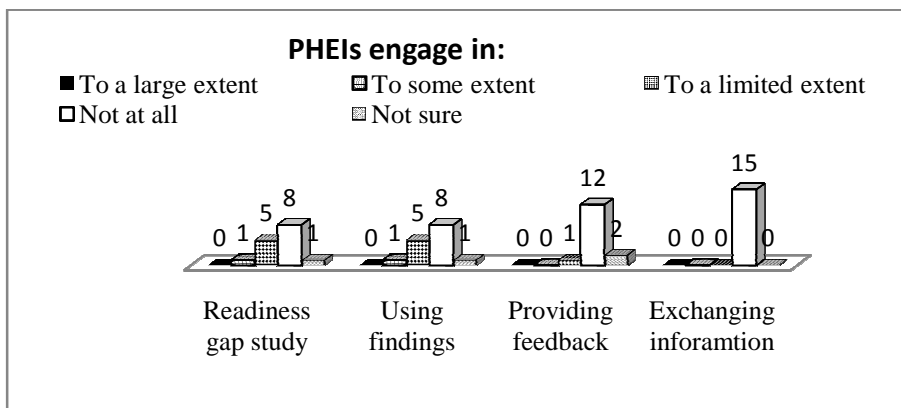
Research indicates that students who are exposed to tasks that are rigorous, require critical thinking and analysis, and allow students to see their readiness level while they are in high schools or even at primary schools have better chance of succeeding in HE. PHEIs can increase students' success rate in HE by (1) making the PS teaching and assessment rigorous,

(2) including tasks and activities that encourage critical thinking and analysis, and (3) asking students to evaluate their readiness level.

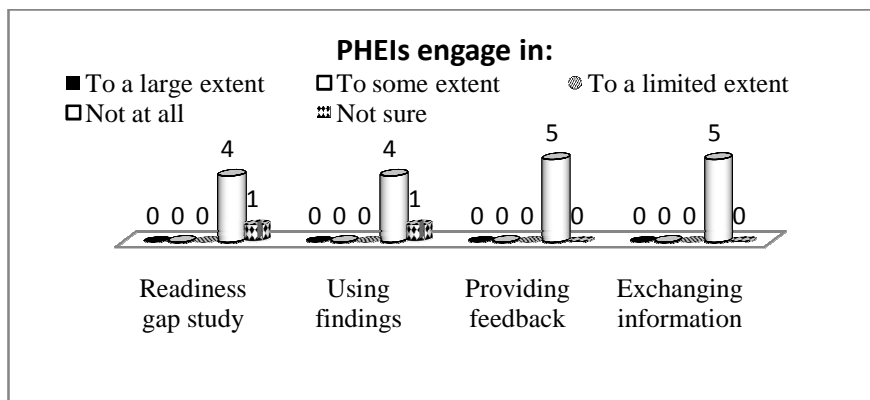
The results in the above graph clearly show that PHEIs made no significant attempt to this effect. 73.33% of the respondents from PHEIs said their institutions played no role in making PS teaching and assessment rigorous. 60% of them also asserted that PHEIs did nothing to make PS teaching and assessment critical thinking and analysis inclusive. More than half of them (53.33%) confirmed that their institutions never gave PSs any support to make their teaching and assessment HE-readiness oriented. Contrary to the above views, a significant number of them claimed that their institutions helped PSs make their teaching and assessment rigorous, and involve critical thinking and analysis and HE readiness tasks. This claim was negated by all of the study subjects from the PSs and all of the interviewees. The good thing is that all respondents indicated, in the open-ended question and during interviews, that doing this would increase students' level of readiness for HE.

Graph 3: Respondents' views on readiness gap identification and exchange of information

PHEI leaders' responses



PS leaders' responses



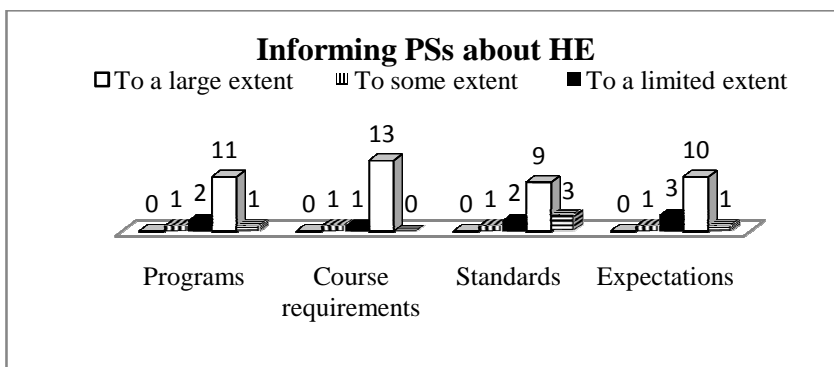
Identifying students' readiness gap, exchanging the findings and using them to inform teaching and assessment while students are at PSs is believed to guarantee the production of HE-ready students. Asked whether PHEIs study student readiness gaps, use findings to inform their teaching and

assessment, provide feedback to PSs based on the findings, and try to learn about PS students to enhance students' readiness for HE while they are in PSs, most of the respondents of both groups claimed that such commitments are non-existent. Five (33.33%) of the respondents from the PHEIs claimed that PHEIs attempted to identify students' readiness gap to a limited extent. The same percentage of respondents from this sector also claimed that PHEIs use the findings of such gap analysis to inform their teaching and assessment. During interviews, it was found out that PHEIs conducted no gap analysis while students are in their respective PSs. They said they tried to learn students' problems after students joined them. All of the interviewees said that they conduct a one to three hour (on average) orientation session to newly admitted students to help them have some ideas about the institution's expectations, rules and regulations.

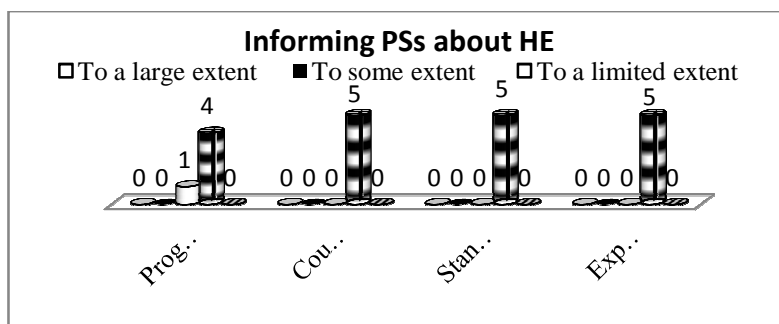
Although PHEIs claimed to use this session as a means to learn about students' readiness level through question and answer, the session's aim is not to assess students' readiness level and seek ways to address issues related to it. This session might help create awareness about institutional policies, regulations, etc but may not have impact on students' readiness for HE since student readiness does not happen overnight.

Graph 4: Respondents' views on whether PHEIs inform PSs about their programs, course requirements, standards and expectations

PHEI leaders' responses



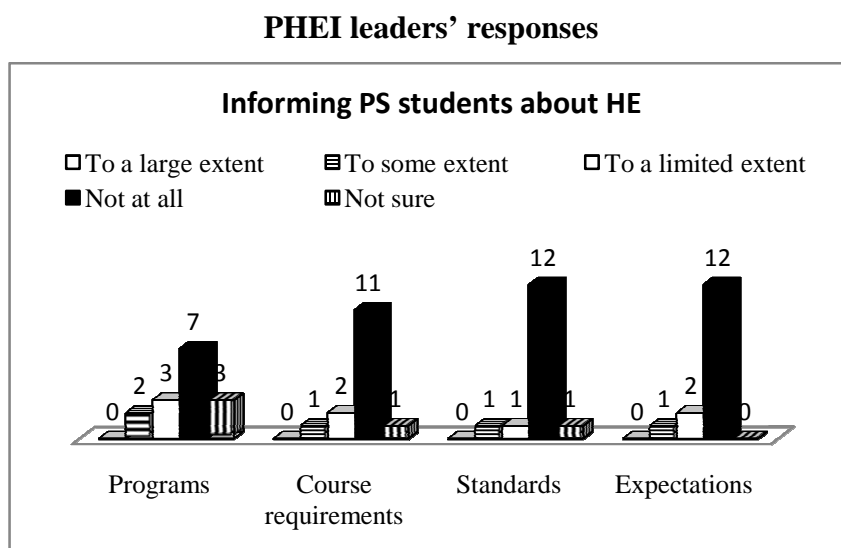
PS leaders' responses



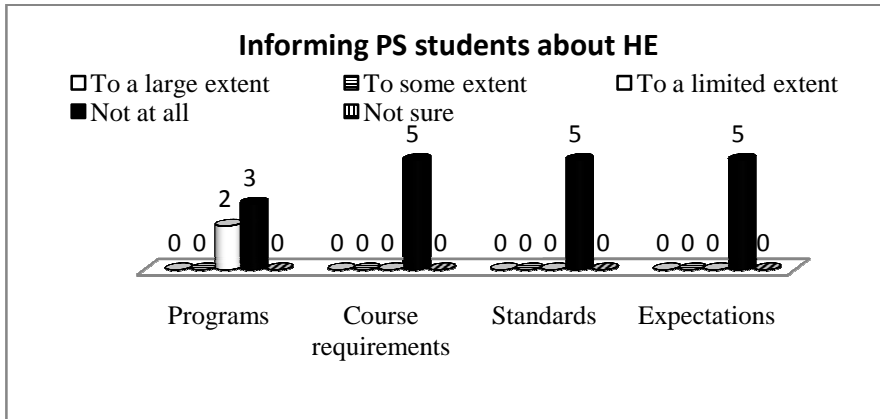
Research has indicated that students informed of HE programs, course requirements, standards and expectations perform better than those who have no idea of these issues. In this regard, the PHEIs which underwent this study seem to have made almost no attempt to keep PSs informed of their programs, requirements, standards and expectations. As indicated in the above graph, most of the respondents from PHEIs and almost all of the respondents from the PSs confirmed that PHEIs did not do anything to raise

PSs’ awareness on the aforementioned matters which would have helped students sort out available HE programs, requirements, expectations and choose the fields of studies that suit their bent, potential, etc, thus increasing their success rate. During interviews, all of the study subjects mentioned that apart from the advertisement leaflets PHEIs distribute in streets, the TV ads, and exhibition participations, all of which intend to promote programs PHEIs have and call for registration, the PHEIs never walked in to PSs to explain about themselves, assist students to make decisions about their career and help students to predict what to expect upon joining HE. This is, many of the interviewees said, a perspective to which PHEIs never paid attention.

Graph 5: Respondents’ views on PHEIs’ efforts in informing PS students about their programs, course requirements, standards and expectations



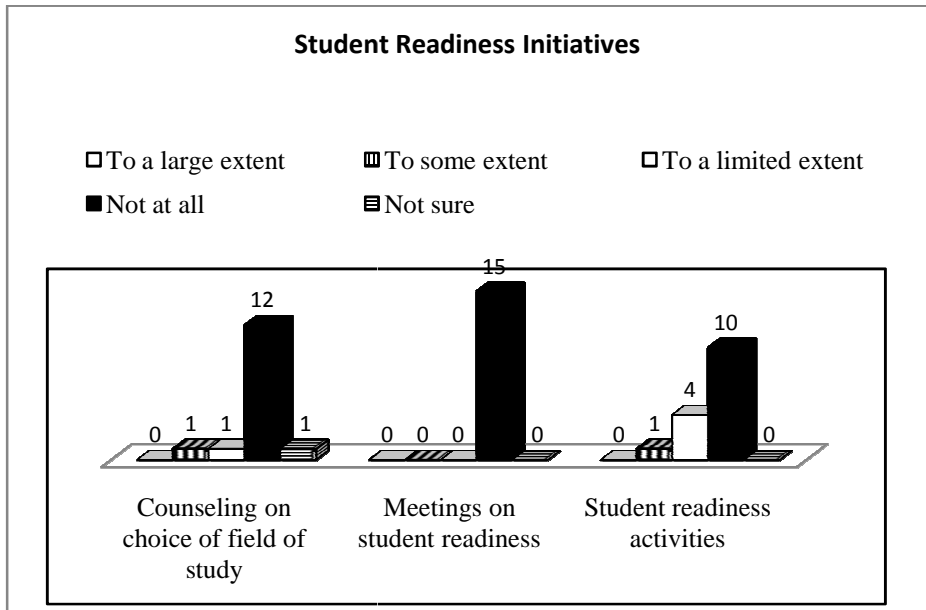
PS leaders' responses



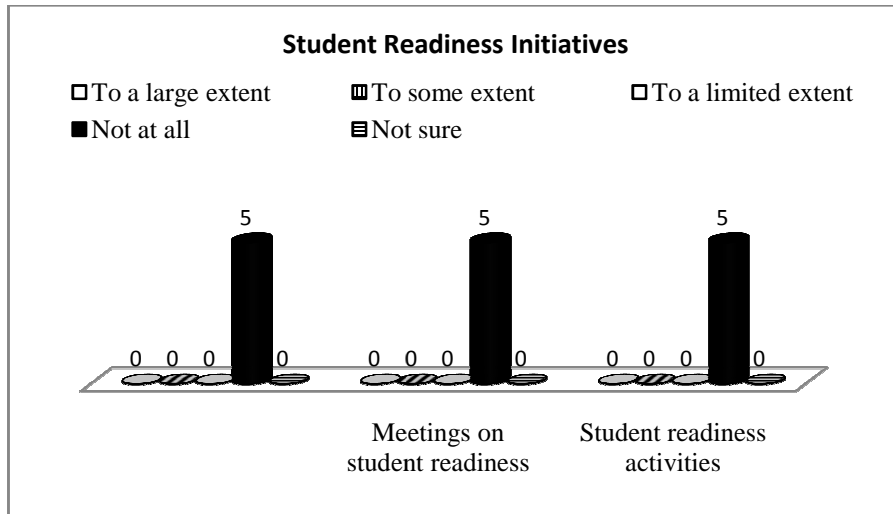
Informing students about HE programs, course requirements, standards and expectations while they are at secondary education was reported to increase their chance of succeeding in HE. The findings in the above graph tells us that PHEIs' effort in exposing students to their programs, course requirements, standards and expectations is minimal. Whereas the majority of the respondents in both categories claimed that PHEIs did not engage in keeping PS students aware of their programs, course requirements, standards and expectations, 33.33% of the sample PHEIs leaders claimed that their institutions attempted to aware PS students about their programs to some extent and to a limited extent. This was supported by two of the five respondents from the PS leaders. The interview results, however, conform to the responses of the majority of the respondents of the questionnaire. Almost all of the interviewees said they would be astonished if there was any PHEI that might have done this.

Graph 6: Respondents' responses about PHEIs' engagement in student readiness activities

PHEI leaders' responses



PS leaders' responses



The results obtained about PHEIs' engagement in counseling students on their choice of fields of studies, holding consultative meetings with PSs on ensuring student readiness for HE, and establishing collaborative efforts toward student readiness are in conformity with the results discussed so far. There seems to exist no link between PHEIs and PSs. As can be seen in the above graph, 80%, 100% and 66.66% of the respondents from the PHEIs and all of the respondents from the PSs claimed that PHEIs gave no counseling services to students on their choices of fields of studies, held no deliberations with PSs and students on student readiness, and initiated no student readiness activity, respectively. This was also confirmed during interviews and in the open-ended question. These sub-sectors (PHEIs and PSs) seem to have no information about each other. It is, therefore, difficult to talk about alignment between them.

Conclusion

Student readiness is a serious concern in the Ethiopian HE sector as could be learnt from the respondents' observations which put most students underprepared irrespective of the lack of scientific study. Most students joining HE are rated underprepared. This is likely to affect the teaching learning process. Unfortunately, student readiness does not seem to have received the attention it deserves. In spite of the PHEI leaders' conviction that PHEIs need to proactively participate in the production of HE-ready students, they remained passive. Although PHEIs and PSs are two sides of a coin, there is an observable disjunction between them, where one has no idea about the other. There is no collaborative effort taking place between PHEIs and PSs to respond to student readiness. It doesn't seem that PHEIs thought of student readiness as part of their responsibility. PHEIs attempt to create awareness about their policies, regulations and expectations after students join them. PHEIs admit students about whose readiness level they can say nothing. On the positive note, there seems to exist strong conviction about the need for partnership between PSs and PHEIs.

Recommendations

Student readiness should be an outstanding agendum for the PHEIs since it can promote PHEIs' activities, make their presence felt, increase students' success in HE studies. PHEIs need to develop a scheme that allows them to update themselves of developments in the PSs. It looks imperative that there is a need to set up forums that regularly and periodically deliberate on student readiness. To ensure that PSs produce HE-ready students, greater collaboration is needed. PHEIs should go down to learn the facts on the ground inform the PS teaching and assessment practices and contribute their share.

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