



**Enhancing Public-Private Partnerships for Development of Competitive Higher
Education
in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education
by
Abebe Haile Gabriel (PhD)**

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***Enhancing Public-Private Partnerships for Development of Competitive Higher Education
in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education***

Abebe Haile Gabriel (PhD)

Ethiopian Civil Service College

Abstract

Judged by the number of higher education providers in the private sector and by the size of their enrolments, one could note that private higher education is one of the fastest growing sectors in the country. Such a growth of private higher education provision is a logical outcome of a traditional education system that has a serious structural deficiency, which has created a backlog of hundreds of thousands of potentially able and willing learners; i.e., the demand for higher education was far exceeding its supply. This growth has also brought about a new and important development in terms of changing people's attitude towards higher education - i.e., it has demonstrated that people should and could take responsibility for their own (and their children) education. Although private higher education institutions are 'private', their product is for 'public consumption'. Private higher education institutions are thus playing a big role of social responsibility.

This paper attempts to present a general framework for productive public-private partnerships for the development of competitive higher education in Ethiopia. It first outlines the major points of departure that guides the arguments in the rest of the paper. These points revolve around the role and position of higher education in determining the country's competitiveness in the global marketplace, the problems with the traditional approach of organizing and providing education, the concept of education as a business, the balance between quality enhancement and expansion of enrolment, and issues of sustainability. Then some of the salient outstanding issues are identified including expansion, access, quality and relevance. This is followed by charting out a general framework that defines productive public-private partnership and collaborative engagement. The divergent perspectives surrounding private higher education which guide and dictate the behavior, actions and outcomes of any partnerships are discussed. The argument is that the dominant perspectives tend towards either a highly restrictive or facilitative environment determining the performance of the partnership and its outcomes. Shared vision on higher education, clarified mission and roles of actors as well as mutual trust are identified as building blocks. Within the purview of such convergent vision and clarified missions, the role of each counterpart is outlined: government ought to work in such a way as to induce demand, influence supply and facilitate quality assurance, thus enhancing the competitiveness of the institutions and the country at large in the global marketplace. Private HEIs ought to demonstrate that they have a stake in quality through, for example, formulating a robust and rigorous quality assurance mechanism and implementing it through innovative approaches and organized response. Useful lessons could be drawn from both success and failure experiences elsewhere.

Abebe Haile Gabriel. Enhancing Public-Private Partnership for Development of Competitive Higher Education in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education.

The paper concludes by reiterating the importance of considering higher education as a social good even when it has to be provided through private means, the significance of viewing quality assurance and expansion of market share as mutually reinforcing objectives in the medium-long term, the relevance of promoting the development of quality higher education provision for the country's competitiveness, the instrumentality of productive public-private partnership based on convergent vision, and the criticality of the attitude, behavior, and actions of the private higher education sub-sector in determining the outcomes. The role of external factors is to facilitate or retard the pace.

1. Introduction

Ten years ago there wasn't a private higher education provider worth the name. In a matter of less than a decade's time, several colleges have mushroomed throughout the country even though most of them are geographically concentrated in the capital, Addis Ababa. Such a proliferation of higher education providers is a logical outcome of an education system that has a serious structural deficiency, which has created a backlog of hundreds of thousands of potentially able and willing learners; i.e., the demand for higher education was far exceeding its supply. Hence, even at the time when many people took to their faith the conviction that higher education was supposed to be paid for by the government and not to be self-financed, tens of thousands of learners and parents opted for financing their (and their children's) education by their own bootstraps. This fact that people first and foremost should assume responsibility for their education is an important development which also gave the impetus for a further proliferation of higher education providers in the private sector.

Private higher education is the fastest growing sector in many countries. It has long dominated higher education systems in many Asian countries including Japan, South Korea, Taipei China, Indonesia, and the Philippines. There has been a dramatic shift from public to private higher education in Latin America. For example, at least half of higher education students are enrolled in private higher education institutions in Brazil, Mexico, Columbia, Peru, and Venezuela. The reason for such fast expansion largely stems from an inability in many countries of the government to fund expansion.

The situation also resembles what had actually happened in many other African countries. Once, there was economic liberalization in many African countries, there was a rush to invest on higher education. Consequently, the number of private higher education institutions has increased. But, the African experience also depicts a scenario in which some private universities were there only in name to such an extent that they were referred to as 'briefcase' universities. Prof. Paul Vitta of the Regional Director of UNESCO cautions, "...as we liberalize the field of higher education, we must have the wherewithal to ensure quality. Private universities often encounter the

danger of disproportionate growth of the number of students on one hand, compared to resources on the other. Compromise on quality becomes the price that is paid” .

But one has to note that it is not only in the higher education area that the expansion of private sector has been observed over the last few years. It is also important to consider the expansion of private sector higher education institutions as part and parcel of private sector expansion over the period.

As profound changes are taking place in the private sector higher education, the public sector has also been going through a number of fundamental changes. It is no more the case that admission to higher education institutions should be limited to few thousands a year. In fact, if all goes well, the Ministry of Education has a plan of ensuring that each university (and there are already eight of them) will have an enrolment capacity of 10,000 each year. Postgraduate enrolment alone is expected to rise beyond 6000 a year. Besides the colleges and institutes that offer diploma programs enroll hundreds of thousands every year. In addition, it is no more the case that government guarantees instant employment of all graduates of public higher education institutions, a fact that characterized the status quo until the early 1990s. This will have implication for higher education provision in the private sector – it influences the demand, supply, product quality and competitiveness and development of the private sector higher education institutions.

This paper attempts to present a framework for productive public-private partnerships for an effective provision of higher education in Ethiopia. It first outlines the major points of departure that guides the arguments in the paper, charts out a general framework that defines collaborative engagement, and identifies what the government and the private higher education providers need to address to achieve the vision and goal of higher education in Ethiopia.

2. Points of Departure

The following points would serve as points of departure for the subsequent arguments. The list, however, is by no means exhaustive.

- i. Education in general and higher education in particular is the scarcest service in Ethiopia. The present state of backwardness could apparently be explained by the lack of it. The country's competitiveness in the global market place is going to be determined by the extent to which this situation is changed. Hence, any effort that contributes towards opening and expanding educational opportunities at all levels must be encouraged.

Abebe Haile Gabriel. Enhancing Public-Private Partnership for Development of Competitive Higher Education in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education.

- ii. The traditional approach of providing higher education has its drawbacks. Public provision of higher education for free is neither sustainable nor equitable. Higher education is costly and it cannot be sustained; this could explain some of the reasons as to why access to higher education opportunity remained low in Ethiopia. Moreover, it has private returns that may exceed social returns; hence it is increasingly getting difficult to justify financing private benefits through taxpayer's money (public resources).
- iii. Charging fees for providing higher education to learners is no more the exclusive domain of private providers. Of course evening programs offered by public higher education institutions have always been fee-based. More recently, public higher education institutions are introducing fees (in terms of cost sharing and/or income generating ventures). However, such a move is externally induced. A Proclamation is issued to that effect setting the stage for effectiveness, efficiency, transparency and accountability of provision of services and resource utilization. Private HEIs have a lot of experience to share with public HEIs in this regard.
- iv. Quality of higher education in Ethiopia has been on the decline in general. It could be explained in terms of inputs, processes, the external environment, outputs, etc. A robust system of quality assurance has been lacking. The existing system of accreditation has a number of problems. Issues of quality and relevance of higher education should not be viewed in isolation from expansion of access. In fact, I would argue, expansion of access should not be pursued at the expense of quality and relevance. Otherwise, the whole project loses meaning and purpose.
- v. Although private higher education institutions are 'private' in terms of ownership, their product is for 'public consumption'. Private higher education institutions are thus playing a big role of social responsibility and accountability. This needs to be appropriately articulated by both the public and private sectors. The Higher Education Proclamation № 351/2003 has the following to say in its Preamble. "Whereas, it has become necessary to lay down a system and issue requirements that enable higher education to produce quality and skilled human power adequately to meet the needs of the country; ... to create appropriate legal framework so that research conducted by higher education shall be problem solving and directed towards the utilization of the potential resources of the country; ... to determine by law the directions of the private higher education institutions in order to promote their contribution in expanding education and conducting research..." To this effect, private HEIs are accountable to the Ministry of Education for their performance as an institution of education.
- vi. There are synergies to be harnessed by promoting public-private partnerships that work. Such partnerships could take on a number of forms (e.g., private HEIs could forge partnerships with the government, with public HEIs, and even with the private sector, etc.). The foundation upon which such a partnership is based should be

on convergent vision and mutual trust and understanding. Creating, clarifying and sharing that vision is a challenge for both the public and private operators.

- vii. Provision of quality higher education between public and private operators should be based on the principle of competitive cooperation. Competition enhances quality, it doesn't necessarily lead to zero-sum game solutions; there is always the 'third alternative' to win-win solutions. Cooperation enhances capacity both to enlarge the entire pie as well as the share of each partaker.

3. Some Outstanding Issues

3.1. Expansion of Access and Assurance of Quality & Relevance

One way of looking at these would be as if access and quality were either not inter-related or are mutually exclusive. Such a presumption holds that since quality assurance takes time as well as a significant amount of investment, there is an impending risk of losing the market share that exists now. One should wait until minimum quality is maintained and try to reach as many learners as possible in the short-term as a preferred strategy. In this case, though desirable, quality is an objective that is hard to be achieved in the short-term because there is a danger of losing the market share now and/or there is lack of necessary capacity to address it now. This approach may succeed in enrolling large numbers in the short-term. However, it also runs in the direction of jeopardizing its long-term prospects. Soon, the public will realize the apparent differences in quality among providers of higher education and possibly abandon those institutions that rush student registration and bend on handing out diplomas. Hence, such an approach is a short-sighted one and could actually be suicidal.

Quality of higher education provision is not an agenda that can be relegated to some future date. We must understand that in most cases the primary reason for opting to private higher education is because potential learners don't have access to public universities and colleges which don't cost much financially, but their credibility is already established, etc. Hence, a certain level of credibility adds to desirability. But, once that choice is made, why would students go to certain private higher education institutions and not to others? Again credibility is an important criterion, which at the moment is being served through the MOE accreditation mechanism. However, the existing system of accreditation has a long way to go to appropriately assure quality of higher education provision. The single most important reason as to why government accreditation is so desired both by the students as well as by the higher education provision providers in the private sector is that civil service regulations by design focus on the production of the academic credentials, accredited by the Ministry of Education, rather than on actual performance of the person for such important entitlements as employment, promotion, etc. The second reason could be affordability since the general background is poverty. As long as programs are accredited by the Ministry of Education (no matter how they actually rate on quality scale since there is no mechanism to know that), people

Abebe Haile Gabriel. Enhancing Public-Private Partnership for Development of Competitive Higher Education in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education.

would prefer those institutions charging less fees for the same programs. Accessibility in terms of geographical proximity is another reason since it reduces costs. Those who started early might have certain comparative advantages. Peer pressure (keeping up with the Joneses) could be another factor, etc.

A second way of looking at it is taking hold of quality at the center of it all from the very beginning no matter how small initial demand looks like. This approach presumes that demonstrated quality provision generates its own demand in the medium-long term. Such institutions take their work rather seriously (student enrolment, investment on facilities, human resources management and development, customer care and handling, etc.) In effect, what the first group of institutions might actually be doing is promotion work for the second group and hence in effect lose their market share to the latter on a permanent basis.

The Ethiopian private higher education sector has tendencies along the continuum of both types. On one hand, there are some who tend to make little distinction between settings up of a make-shift kiosk, putting up a cocktail of items on the shelf and try to lure education hungry customers by cosmetic means and that of provision of higher education as a serious business. On the other hand, there are others who take the responsibility and the challenges quite seriously and in some few cases have actually succeeded to demonstrate their competitiveness nationally as well as internationally, through exporting skilled labor for example.

3.2. Sustainability

Sustainability is an important aspect of higher education provision. It is linked with social responsibility, quality of services, and viability of the institution. In fact, it could be shown that sustainability is an outcome of a balanced pursuit of quality objectives with expansion of market share. Quality can neither be conceived nor achieved without some minimum size of market share. Pursuing quality objective alone without a minimum enrolment expansion objective might compromise institutional viability (quadrant A & B in fig 1). Quality assurance by its very nature is investment intensive (both human and capital) - profits need to be realized however small they might be at the beginning. Similarly, larger market share cannot be sustained for long without ensuring a certain minimum level of quality standards. Hence, chasing an enrolment (and profit) objective without maintaining quality is not sustainable; it backfires on the very objective of expanding market share and on institutional viability (quadrants A & C in fig 1). Quality helps to expand the market envelope in the medium-long term. Similarly, increased market share helps to enhance quality since it reduces unit cost of provision of the service and therefore the competitiveness of the institution. Both objectives should be viewed as complementary to each other in the long-term if sustainability is to be achieved (Quadrant D in Figure 1).

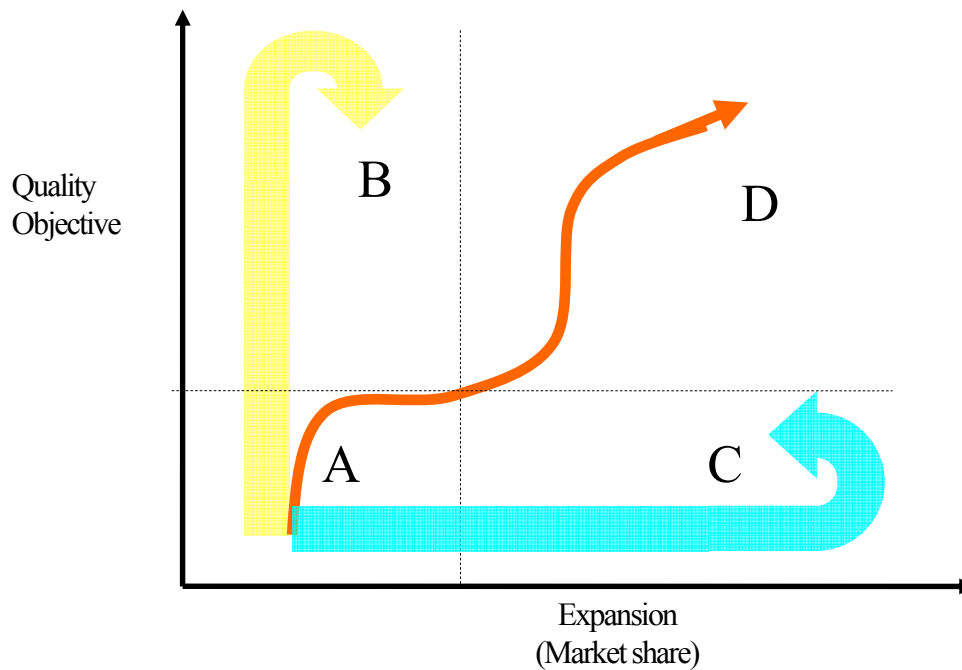


Fig. 1: Striking a Balance between 'Quality' and 'Expansion'

A number of factors determine sustainability. Some of these are demand side factors such as the market share, image, fees, etc. Others are supply related such as institutional capacity, cost of provision, quality, facilities, etc. Government can influence both demand and supply, hence the sustainability of private sector higher education provision through its policies, support programs, etc. Government affects the demand, efficiency and equity of private education through, for example, funding, entry provisions, regulations (e.g. non-profit), indirect barriers to entry (e.g. red tape). Public-Private partnership should be aimed at enhancing the sustainability of higher education so as to achieve the stated national higher education goals.

4. A Framework for Productive Public-Private Partnership

4.1. Divergent Perspectives

Our perspectives are the lenses through which we look at the world. And, the way we look at the world determine our attitude as well as our behavior in our daily encounters. There are divergent perspectives around the role and functions of private institutions of higher learning. In this regard there are important questions to be asked that need proper addressing: a moment of reflection and perhaps self awareness and appraisal might be useful in this regard:

- What is the dominant perspective regarding the role, function, etc. of higher education by the :
 - private sector operators themselves?
 - public institutions of higher learning?
 - government?
 - public in general?

<i>Agreement on:</i>	<i>Perspectives about Private HEIs by</i>				
	<i>Private HEIs</i>	<i>Public HEIs</i>	<i>Private sector</i>	<i>Government</i>	<i>Society</i>
Expansion	?	?	?	?	?
Quality	?	?	?	?	?
Credibility	?	?	?	?	?
Profitability	?	?	?	?	?
Accountability	?	?	?	?	?
Governance	?	?	?	?	?
Capacity	?	?	?	?	?
Competitiveness	?	?	?	?	?
Partnership	?	?	?	?	?
etc.	?	?	?	?	?

The reason that the writer of this paper raises these questions is because perspectives are important for guiding our behavior and actions individually or when we want to act in an interdependent environment. For example, since effective partnership should be built on shared goals and on mutual trust, these different perspectives have a lot of implications for building and strengthening partnerships among the private HEIs themselves, between private and public HEIs, and between private HEIs and the government, etc. Two perspectives could be identified in this respect.

The first is what could be called a ‘Conservative Perspective’ that posit the argument that private higher education institutions are business entities, and they strive for maximization of self/private interest not public interest. The ABC of business principle is maximizing profit and the end justifies the means – in this case, there is little difference between operating a restaurant and a college. Business firms continue to operate (their managers decide so), at least in the short-run, only as long as they don't make loss, or lose less by operating the firm rather than by closing it. There is no guarantee for the public if a certain private operator decides to close its provision of education merely on business criteria. On the other hand, this ‘Conservative Perspective’ holds that by contrast public higher education institutions would not care about profits, etc. For example, some of the complaints advanced look like the following:

- They charge high amount of money in tuition fees;
- They are risky: if a private institution goes bankrupt, what is going to happen to students who are in the middle of their programs;

Abebe Haile Gabriel. Enhancing Public-Private Partnership for Development of Competitive Higher Education in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education.

- They have low quality education and fewer fields of study (often quick fixes);
- Research and scholarships are not encouraged in private institutions;
- They will take away faculty from public universities, most of whom are understaffed already. The result is loss in quality in both public and private institutions;
- The government will use private universities as an excuse to neglect the public system; i.e., government can put less energy into that system because there will not be an alternative; and
- There are concerns over good governance (academic freedom, etc.); i.e., some institutions grapple with requirements of their owners (business motives), who often interfere with governance, recruitment of personnel, and academic progress.

Such a perspective leads to a highly restrictive environment (for instance, there are governments that insist that private HEIs should operate as a non-profit entity, offer no diploma unless affiliated with public universities, etc.).

The second perspective is what could be termed as a 'liberal perspective' and sees a number of advantages of private provision of higher education. Some of the arguments include:

- They offer choices to learners (e.g., public universities are mainly academic not skill based). Students want private universities, so it is their decision;
- They reduce overcrowding in public universities; hence reduce the pressure on the latter;
- They won't need any public money – hence reduce the budgetary pressure on government;
- They will create healthy competition between different kinds of higher education providers include public HEIs; and
- They will provide quality education and keep students from leaving the regions and the country for universities situated in central urban centers or overseas.

A behavior and action informed by such a 'liberal perspective' is not only different from that of a 'conservative perspective' but also arrives at a different and higher partnership solution altogether.

Taken in isolation, some of these could be over exaggerations, or extremes. A good way of looking at is as a continuum. For example, the issues aren't the case of either or (e.g., either there is quality or not; either profit or not,

etc.) HEIs are located on certain points along the continuum and continually change (improve or deteriorate) their position.

4.2. The Importance of Context

One importance of situating the issue in a specific context is that it makes the arguments concrete. It is a universal knowledge that education is key to development. For Ethiopia, it explains the reasons as to why the door to development has been locked - because this key was hidden for long. Capacity of the public as well as the private sector, etc., to bring about the intended results could be constrained unless investment in education (both in quality and expansion of access) is taken on board. The opportunity cost of waiting until government makes that a reality in sufficient scale could be quite high; that is even when it is possible to argue that the government has a comparative advantage to provide higher education at the moment. At the same time, it is important to understand that provision of education, including higher education, using the private route could be cost-effective including for government, and if managed properly could bring about the intended impact relatively quickly. Most importantly, the task of provision of higher education by the government and the private sector should be viewed not as mutually exclusive, but as mutually reinforcing and collaborative endeavor. The country is poor (in terms of every indicator and by many standards); hence, it must be in a position to tap all the available resources.

Over the last decade or so what has been observed as a general global and local tendency is for the government to concentrate its resources and energy on the kind of things that it does better. That is why there has been privatization of public enterprises, deregulation of the market, etc. Public universities are increasingly demanded to behave 'business-like'. The legal framework providing for the necessary administrative and financial autonomy has already been enacted. The issue is not so much on whether public universities have or have not been faring enough with respect to the issues that really matter (e.g., quality, access, etc.); it is also not so much a question of preferring private HEIs to the public ones. It is rather a question of unleashing the hidden potentials in both.

4.3. The Building Blocks: bridging the gaps

Our perspectives should center on the vision we have for higher education in the country as well as the mission and roles of higher education providers including public, private, and NGOs operators towards realizing that vision. If sufficient clarity is achieved at that level, the public-private dichotomy in effect becomes a matter of convenience. If on the other hand we lose this fundamental grip, then not only public-private dichotomy in provision of higher education becomes obstructive to public-private partnership, but actually the gap would grow from 'gulley' to 'valley'.

Abebe Haile Gabriel. Enhancing Public-Private Partnership for Development of Competitive Higher Education in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education.

Effective partnership requires not just a perception of common vision but also clarity of mandates and responsibilities. Naturally the parties to the partnership should discharge their respective responsibilities in a manner that lives up to (even surpasses) expectations. Also, each party needs to understand and effectively respond to the needs of the other partner within the purview of the convergent vision. That is how interdependencies can be built on the basis of mutual trust.

Considering education as a “public good”, government may formulate policies that regulate private institutions. Formulating the right regulatory mix and implementing consistently and efficiently using innovative instruments that enhance the development of good quality private higher education institutions is necessary. Government policies are central to the growth of private higher education institutions and affect them in different ways.

What Can the Government Do?

- There are important initiatives that are aimed at fundamentally changing the attitude and performance of the public sector and its relationship with the private sector. Some of these include, the Civil Service Reform Program (CSRP), private sector capacity development, etc. There is a realization that whatever the government does to the development of the private sector is not just to help the sector but to improve the country’s competitiveness in the global market. Education is the cutting edge! By enhancing higher education, the country’s competitiveness on global market increases (both directly as in the case of exporting education [or import substituting] and indirectly by making the country more attractive to foreign investment). Hence, the government can enhance investment in private higher education through making it attractive financially and less cumbersome procedurally.
- Directly induce the demand for private higher education through, for example, providing fellowships to students, outsourcing educational service delivery to the private sector providers, etc. For example, the Ministry of Capacity Building wants the active involvement of those higher education institutions (both public and private) having management development training and consultancy programs in the implementation of the CSRP. Some of the expectations would include that these institutions redesign (or develop) their curriculum to suit and meet the specific needs of the reform program, existence of demonstrable consulting capacities, etc.
- Directly influence supply of private higher education by increasing staff availability through, for example, allowing joint appointmentship of professors, lecturers and researchers between public sector employees and private sector HEIs and also assisting the public higher education sector; enhancing management

Abebe Haile Gabriel. Enhancing Public-Private Partnership for Development of Competitive Higher Education in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education.

capabilities, staff development ventures, etc., for the private higher education institutions; as well as through policies on tax, access to land, loans, etc.

- Influence quality and equity of higher education provision in the private sector through using several policy instruments such as discriminatory treatment of HEIs against meeting certain standards. This can be done through the introduction of a demand side financing that funds students who get admission to certain institutions that demonstrate certain level of quality and relevance.

What Can the Private Institutions Do?

Again considering that provision of higher education is a 'public good' even when it has to be provided by private operators (and this perspective is the cornerstone for effective public-private partnerships), and private HEIs which have a number of issues to address.

The highly contested issue is that of quality to which the other issues are attached (credibility, sustainability, etc.). Hence, some degree of de-emphasizing the business motive in favor of a social motive would be necessary.

- They need to demonstrate that they have a stake in quality higher education. Formulation of an inbuilt regulatory mechanism for quality assurance will be necessary. They need to discourage some 'brief-case' colleges from their delusive stances that apparently damage the images of those institutions that have credible programs and efforts (handing out of diplomas is not necessarily provision of higher education). In this regard, lessons could be drawn from experiences elsewhere as well as from successful professional associations that strictly and rigorously regulate quality products and services based on membership codes of conduct. Most prestigious universities in the world are not necessarily public universities – so, quality education is not necessarily a problem of private providers. Quality assurance is also not necessarily the function of governments. But, the context is different here. In Israel for example, no college (public or private) can issue diplomas unless it is affiliated with universities. The Council of Higher Education exercises a lot of regulatory mechanism on quality and funds. Similar practical experiences could be cited from other countries.
- Organized response is necessary. They must demonstrate that what they aim to achieve is consistent with and supportive of the country's vision for higher education.
- Liaise with public universities based on mutual benefits in terms of joint programs as well as with the private industry for their practical attachment programs. This helps them in the long run demonstrating that their products are competitive and highly demanded, not only by the private sector but also by the public sector. It is also important to remember that still the public sector is the big employer in the country.

Abebe Haile Gabriel. Enhancing Public-Private Partnership for Development of Competitive Higher Education in Ethiopia: Some Reflections on Private Higher Education.

For example, *Amhara* Regional Government is considering employing people who have diplomas not just based on their diplomas but also based on exams – an indication that not all diplomas are necessarily equal. The implication of implementing such a practice in a consistent and larger scale is that diplomas from certain institutions might just become worthless pieces of paper – significantly eroding public trust in the institutions. At the moment producing diplomas (Ministry of Education accredited ones) would lead to certain set of entitlements; this is partly the reason why thousands of civil servants are enrolled in the various programs of private colleges. However, with a change in the system of valuation of credentials (e.g., result-based performance management system), this would induce changes in the quality and value of the certificates issued by higher education institutions both public and private. Hence, private higher education institutions must be prepared for this.

5. Concluding Remarks

It is essential to reiterate the importance of considering higher education as a social good even when it has to be provided through private means. It is also significant to highlight the importance of considering quality assurance and expansion of market share as mutually reinforcing objectives in the medium-long term. Promoting the development of quality higher education provision is instrumental not only just for boosting the national implementation capacity but also for enhancing the country's competitiveness in the global marketplace. Productive public-private partnership and engagement based on that convergent vision provides a framework for enhancing the capacity of the sector, and the position of the country at large. Finally, it is crucial to underscore the fact that the attitude, behavior, and actions of the private higher education sub-sector determine the outcomes.

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