The Ethiopian Higher Education Equity Policy and its Flaws

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine and understand the Ethiopian higher education equity policy issues. It is document-based research using different policy and research documents and reports as primary and secondary sources of data. The basis for the analysis is laid down through the review of a range of literature in the area of equity in general and equity in higher education in particular. The analysis of this study reveals that although there are some strong political and legal bases, as well as policy provisions, the issue of equity in higher education in Ethiopia is addressed in a fragmented and insufficient way. The equity policies are found to be inadequate in terms of the equity groups identified and the equity measures prescribed. Moreover, some of the equity measures suggested appear to be ambiguous and short-sighted. The paper finally suggests the need to re-conceptualize the issues of equity in Ethiopian higher education policies in order to lay a comprehensive foundation to recognize the equity groups adequately, as well as to identify appropriate and sufficient equity measures.

Keywords: Higher Education, Equity in Higher Education, Ethiopia

Background

The Ethiopian higher education has been under continuous reforms since the fall of the socialist government (Yizengaw, 2007). The reforms generally aim at addressing problems related to access, equity, quality and relevance, and efficiency among others. These areas are identified based on studies conducted by the government of Ethiopia and World Bank researchers. In these studies the Ethiopian higher education is generally characterized as very limited in access, inequitable, poor in quality of teaching, weak in research output, underfunded, having very limited autonomy, a very low level of experienced and qualified teaching staff, and inflexible (Saint 2004; World Bank, 2003; Yizengaw, 2007).

Equity is a persistent policy issue in higher education. Equity, as a policy issue, focuses on ensuring social justice and social inclusion in a society (Martin, 2010). In its 1998 World Conference on Higher Education, UNESCO made a major international call for equity of access to higher education (UNESCO, 1998). A decade later, in 2008, OECD came up with a broader concept of equity, which goes beyond access. According to OECD (2008), equity refers to having a system with equitable "access to, participation in, and outcomes of higher education based only on the individual's innate ability and study effort" (OECD, 2008:14).

OECD (2008) also argues that an equitable higher education system recognizes that individuals' potential at tertiary level is not related to social and personal circumstances such as socio-economic status, gender, place of residence, ethnicity, age or disability. These and other international policy initiatives have firmly planted the issue of equity among the major policy issues at global level (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010; Martin, 2010). However, for various historical, cultural, economic and political reasons greater inequality among various groups has been and is characterizing the Ethiopian higher education (Saint, 2004; Teferra and Altbach, 2004).

The purpose of this paper is, hence, to examine the policy framework for equity issues in the Ethiopian higher education system. The paper reviews the recent development of the concept of equity in higher education. The related policy provisions are, therefore, analyzed based on the literature reviewed. The analysis focuses on what are provided as equity related policies in the Ethiopian context. It specifically attempts to examine the equity groups identified and the measures provided to ensure equity concerns in the Ethiopian higher education.

The first section of this paper presents the concept of equity in higher education by further elaborating equity groups and major equity measures. The next section discusses how the concept of equity is reflected in different Ethiopian higher education policy documents. Finally, the paper presents some conclusions and policy implications.

Equity Issues in Higher Education

The concern of making social, economic and political services, benefits and achievements fair and just, in terms of access, participation and outcomes, for all individuals and groups of a society is related to the concept of social justice and human rights. These concerns are expressed in terms of social policies by being the guiding ideas underlying, inter alia, welfare, education, and health policies (Blakemore & Griggs, 2007).

The last couple of decades have witnessed unprecedented expansion of higher education throughout the world. Clancy and Goastellec (2007) report that by the year 2000 the number of tertiary students had grown to 100 million, and the World Bank (2000) predicts that the number will rise to 150 million by 2025 globally. In connection with such massive expansion, the gross enrolment of the age cohort for higher education has risen significantly. According to Altbach, et al. (2010, p. Vi), the percentage of the age cohort enrolled in tertiary education has grown from 19% in 2000 to 26% in 2007, with the most dramatic gains in upper middle and upper income countries. This massive expansion has been driven mainly by "economic priorities linked to technological change, globalization and increased international competition" (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 137).

The demographic change in higher education has indeed the potential in benefiting more people as it facilitates the move from traditionally elite based higher education to mass higher education. However, the massive expansion observed over the last several decades, despite

many policy initiatives, has not benefited all sectors of society equally (Altbach, et al., 2010). Even at times of expansion and increased access, admission to higher education is preserved to academically selected students on the basis of merit, which basically favours those from certain kinds of social groups or categories (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). Clancy and Goastellec (2007) further argue "…when access is massified, inequalities are reproduced within the higher education structure" (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 138). Such concerns are reiterated within various international conventions, and have thus made the issue of equity in higher education a major policy concern, even at times of massive expansion.

Inequality in higher education is both a problem in itself, as deprivation of basic rights, as well as a problem that reproduces further inequalities in a society. Inequality as a problem per se can be explained by referring to the basic human right issues in access to education and the right to be equally treated in the social system. On the other hand, the potential of higher education to open wider social, economic, and political opportunities to individuals makes it a source of further inequalities. Supporting this idea Anderson argues "the more education one has, the better able one is to compete for coveted positions at selective colleges and, in turn, for better-paying, more prestigious, and intrinsically rewarding careers" [emphasis added] (2006, p. 616). Based on similar premises Altbach, et al. (2010, p. 39) suggest that "…providing equal access to higher education means overcoming the social and economic inequities within each nation and the corresponding disparities that result".

The argument for equal access to higher education was emphasized repeatedly in the declarations that emerged as result of the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education. UNESCO by fully subscribing Article 26(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to education . . . higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). The UNESCO conference in 1998, thus, reaffirms the right to equitable access through its Art. 3(a) which states "… no discrimination can be accepted in granting access to higher education on grounds of race, gender, language or religion, or economic, cultural or social distinctions, or physical disabilities" (UNESCO, 1998).

However, this famous declaration by UNESCO, emphasizes equality of rights in access based only on merit. Merit, while it can be attributed to various factors, is taken as a decisive criterion to enjoy the right to access. Moreover, this declaration is not binding to the signatories and is expected to be materialized according to the goodwill of respective governments. This does not give a clear and strong basis for the realization of the declaration, for example, when governments have other priorities.

In this line of argument, both in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UNSECO's declaration, absolute dependence on merit, is challenged by various researchers. Merit based access to higher education, regardless of its strong justification, has been mentioned as a source of continued reproduction of inequalities in higher education. Clancy and Goastellec (2007) strongly argue that merit based access to higher education strongly favours those who already are advantageous and possess "… principally the good fortune of being born within

certain favoured social groups or categories" (p. 138). They further describe the current massive expansion as a cause for reproducing inequalities in a society. McCowan (2007) also argues:

> Meritocratic admissions procedures without formal discrimination have been the norm since the 1960s but many groups are still heavily underrepresented. Performance on entry examinations is of course dependent not only on ability and effort, but also on the quality of previous schooling, which is normally dependent on these background factors. So an equitable entry system would make some adjustments for these factors, in some cases leading to positive discrimination for certain groups (p. 583).

In general, access to higher education is competitive to varying degrees depending upon context. However, it will always privilege those with superior economic, social and cultural resources or background (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007).

Such a broad understanding of the pervasive problems of inequalities in higher education has substantially attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers over the last couple of decades (Goastellec, 2010). Increasingly, the necessity to go beyond formal equality of right and take account of differences in the opportunity structure is recognized (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Goastellec, 2010). The opportunity structure involves pursuing equity not solely in terms of access to higher education, but also in terms of participation in and outcomes of higher education.

In this sense, there has been much development in understanding equity beyond ensuring equitable access. Goastellec (2007) in Clancy and Goastellec, (2007) mentions the recently growing concern to reconsider merit based equal access and replacing it with the "norm of equality of right" (p. 138). In the same way, OECD also came up with a broader concept of equity that goes beyond access. According to OECD (2008), equity refers to having a system with equitable "access to, participation and success in outcomes of higher education based only on the individual's innate ability and study effort" (OECD, 2008, p. 14). All these show that equity policies or initiatives have to consider broader issues, which ultimately ensure redressing the existing social injustice and inequality other than ensuring equal access.

To sum up, equity is concerned with social justice and ideals of democratization (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). The focus on equity in higher education can be seen from two perspectives. First, it has an intrinsic value per se, taking education as a right. Second, it is also instrumental to break the cycle of social, economic and political inequalities in a society as it aims at ensuring equity in a way that helps to redress historical, social, economic and political inequalities that exist within the society.

Such understandings result in a redefinition of equity itself and ways to redress it. Among the various issues involved in dealing with equity, patterns of inequality are important, in terms of identifying the different segments of society that are underrepresented within, or excluded from, hegemonic/dominant social systems. Identifying ways to address equity related

problems is also worth reviewing. The following two sections, therefore, present the review of literature in these two areas.

Equity Groups in Higher Education

According to Martin (2010), in addition to the meaning of equity and the rationale behind it, it is important to operationally define "…who should be targeted by equity measures, or in other terms who the equity groups are" (p. 26) depending on the specific conditions of different contexts. Defining these equity groups helps to understand the historic, economic, social and political construction of inequalities, and, as a result, the corrective possibilities (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007).

Equity groups can refer to the following groups of people: women, ethnic minorities, people from low socio-economic status, people with disabilities, older people, and people from remote and rural areas (Altbach, et al., 2010; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Martin, 2010; Schuller, 2003). Indeed, the equity groups in each context are defined based on the specific historical, social, economic and political conditions of countries (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). However, some of the equity groups such as gender/sex, socio-economic background, disability and age seem to be universal in many, if not all, contexts (Nussbaum, 2000; Schuller, 2003; UNESCO, 1998).

Gender or sex based inequality in higher education (Altbach, et al., 2010; Nussbaum, 2000) is a common feature of most of the higher education systems in the world to varying degrees. Specifically, regardless of various policy initiatives, women globally (except in some developed countries) are underrepresented in higher education. Women's under-representation is more severe in graduate and post graduate fields and in some fields of study such as science and technology (OECD, 2008).

The socio-economic background of students is another major source of equity divisions. Students who are from the middle and higher socio-economic classes have the advantage of getting better basic education and are relatively far better prepared for higher education than those from the lower classes (Altbach, et al., 2010; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; OECD, 2008). However, defining who is from the higher and who is from the lower socio-economic classes remains difficult in many countries and data are very limited. With limited data it is also indicated that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are exposed to different challenges after they join higher education (OECD, 2008).

People with disabilities are among the groups of society who are underrepresented in higher education despite current improvements as a result of higher education expansion (Altbach, et al., 2010; OECD, 2008). Systemic and cultural exclusion of people with disabilities from/in earlier education and lack of proper support make them less prepared for, and as result, underrepresented in higher education (OECD, 2008; UNESCO, 2003).

Age is another area of inequality that has been observed in many countries (Altbach, et al., 2010; OECD, 2008; Schuller, 2003). Schuller (2003) argues for a more age inclusive approach to education at all levels, including higher education, which leads the overall educational policy framework towards the visions of lifelong learning (p. 143).

In addition to the above equity groups, there are various groups, which equity initiatives need to address depending on specific situations. Ethnicity, urban-rural division, race, religion and other factors can characterize those specific country situations as they are "idiosyncratic of nations, …that make sense in the context of national history" (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 139).

However, it is important to notice that these equity groups are not mutually exclusive and represent various portions of society. As individuals can be identified by different social groups the division is rather complex and interconnected (Altbach, et al., 2010; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Martin, 2010; Schuller, 2003). As Martin (2010, p. 27) states "…multiple equity concerns are frequently correlated and thus exacerbate disadvantage". This entails the need to carefully analyse and be aware of the complex nature of equity groups.

Equity Strategies for/in Higher Education

The need to promote social justice and democratization of higher education has resulted in various policy initiatives to confront the historical and contemporary inequalities in higher education. Moreover, such policies aim at using higher education as a means to curb socio-economic inequalities in a society through equitable higher education (Altbach, et al., 2010; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Martin, 2010; OECD, 2008). Altbach, et al. (2010) mention such policies as strategies to rectify past wrongs which in one way or another affect individuals' competitiveness, where access to and success in higher education is competitive. The policies and strategies, however, are different in different countries depending on the nature of equity groups and the overall context (Martin, 2010). These policy initiatives include expanding and diversifying higher education, establishing special institutions for target groups, cost and finance related issues, pedagogical innovation and improving internal institutional conditions among others. Affirmative action, however, is the most widely employed strategy to improve the participation of underserved social groups in higher education (Altbach, et al., 2010; Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2005; Martin, 2010; OECD, 2008).

Expansion and diversification (different mode of delivery like distance education, flexible curricula and so on), according to Martin (2010), has proved to be a means to improve the opportunity to a more diverse student population. However, as mentioned earlier, access is still to a great extent, competitive in many parts of the world. This in turn makes the massive expansion another way of reproducing inequalities where the well prepared and advantageous social groups can maximize their opportunities. Hence, although expansion and diversification is a vital condition to solve equality related problems by raising the number of available seats, it is not sufficient to address the problem.

In order to address inequalities, which are due to financial problems, some countries design cost/finance related interventions. According to Altbach, et al. (2010) such policies mainly help students with a low socio-economic background. Different kinds of loan schemes have shown success in increasing access. However, fear of debt tends to be a greater limit for students from poorer backgrounds, since there is less financial "backup" in the case of underemployment after graduation (a common condition in the developing world (Altbach, et al., 2010).

On the other hand, as most students from underprivileged groups are not economically able to afford even their basic needs (food, housing, transportation, stationary etc), they require financial support, if they are to be sustained in the system (Altbach, et al., 2010; Bloom, et al., 2005; OECD, 2008). In order to tackle this problem and encourage them to come to higher education, some countries put in place programmes through which they provide financial support for these students.

Affirmative action, as discussed in the previous section, is a widely used strategy to confront and improve the prevalent inequalities in higher education (Altbach, et al., 2010; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Martin, 2010; OECD, 2008). Affirmative action programmes are used to repair past discrimination. They represent 'positive discrimination' or 'reverse discrimination'. Programmes labelled 'affirmative action' generally give priority to groups once discriminated against or underrepresented in contrast to other social groups identified as privileged groups (Altbach, et al., 2010; Martin, 2010).

Affirmative action is a means to "…redress the effects of past and current disadvantage and to encourage institutions to provide special treatment in terms of access and study support" (Martin, 2010, p. 28). Such redressing involves different measures in different countries based on context. Affirmative action programmes may involve numerical quotas, accepting students with lower scores of national tests or entrance exams (Altbach, et al., 2010; Bloom, et al., 2005; Martin, 2010).

Affirmative action related initiatives, nevertheless, have been controversial and faced resistance mainly from the non-beneficiaries of such initiatives and those who claim to have concern over quality (Altbach, et al., 2010; Martin, 2010). In summarizing the different critics of the opponents of affirmative action initiatives as well as over expectations towards them, Plous (2003) states what he thinks are 'myths about affirmative action'. Some of these myths related to the present discussion include that affirmative action is a way of curing discrimination with discrimination; that it undermines the self-esteem of beneficiaries and that it favours unqualified candidates over the qualified ones. All these according to Plous (2003) are misunderstandings about affirmative action programme objectives.

It can be argued here that these and other arguments against affirmative action seem to be strongly related to so-called "meritocratic" thoughts. Merit based competition, as mentioned earlier, can only be effective under ideal conditions where all competitors have comparable

previous opportunities and privileges, which otherwise benefit only those who are privileged by virtue of being male, from middle class and urban areas (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007).

The above strategies mainly focus on improving access to higher education to the underserved groups of a society. However, the issue of equity has recently developed to ensure equitable participation and success in higher education in addition to equity in access (Altbach, et al., 2010; OECD, 2008). Altbach, et al. (2010) indicate that those students who join higher education through affirmative action programmes constitute a higher proportion of dropouts and need due consideration to ensure their success so that they can meaningfully benefit from the programmes. Taking this into account OECD (2008, p. 66) asserts:

> …gaining access to tertiary education does not guarantee the successful completion of a degree programme. In a number of countries, while progress was achieved in relation to the participation rates of some under-represented groups, success and retention rates for those groups often remained disappointing. There is considerably less knowledge about the obstacles that disadvantaged students encounter to succeed in tertiary education than about the obstacles they encounter prior to accessing tertiary education. In most countries, greater emphasis needs to be placed on equity of outcomes with policies more targeted at ensuring the success of students from under-represented groups. This would translate into more emphasis being placed on student progression throughout studies with special support and follow-up measures to assist those students at risk of failure.

Improving the internal physical and academic facilities of higher education institutions to serve the special needs of students with disabilities, as well as pedagogical interventions are among the areas that are indicated to ensure equitable participation and success of students for the underserved groups of a society (Altbach, et al., 2010; OECD, 2008).

Pedagogical intervention refers to designing and implementing pedagogical approaches that consider the needs and conditions of students who join higher education through affirmative action rather than one-size-fits all approach. This seems more relevant given that not only access is competitive but participation and success also are (Hodkinson & Deverokonda, 2009).

As part of long-term solutions, OECD (2008) emphasizes the need to strengthen and expand primary and secondary education equitably. OECD's argument on earlier intervention is based on the assumption that when there is more inclusive, equitable quality education at an earlier stage, there is a greater chance of seeing an emergence of inclusive set of students who are ready to join higher education. This seems a very comprehensive policy intervention but does not seem helpful when addressing the problems of those who are already through the school system and aspire to enjoy the benefits of higher education.

The need to make higher education equitable in general, redressing historical, cultural, economic and systemic inequalities in particular, is the impetus for equity related higher

education policies. The need for such policies is justified as a human right and social justice issue. Accordingly, different policy initiatives to redress these problems have been designed and implemented in different higher education systems. The following section examines the policy initiatives of the Ethiopian higher education system to redress problems of equity.

Higher Education Equity Policy Provisions in Ethiopia

Considering the education sector as a priority for ensuring poverty reduction and sustainable development, the government of Ethiopia introduced the current Education and Training Policy in 1994 (FDRE, 1994). The policy in general identifies limited access, inequitable distribution of educational opportunities, problems of efficiency, lack of quality and relevance, and undemocratic contents as major problems at all levels of education (FDRE, 1994; MoE, 2002). Following the adoption of this policy, higher education has experienced various reforms based on the problems identified in the policy as well as subsequent studies by the government, the World Bank and individual researchers (Saint, 2004; World Bank, 2003; Yizengaw, 2007).

The then Vice-Minister for higher education, Teshome Yizengaw, explains that higher education policies and strategies were designed and started to be implemented with the objective of "ensuring national development and competitiveness" (Yizengaw, 2007, p. 32). The reform was supported by the World Bank both technically and financially. The World Bank as funding partner and active actor of the higher education reform in Ethiopia forwarded its own recommendations to the Ethiopian higher education sector in 2003. These recommendations, in general, consist of administrative and financial autonomy of institutions, involvement of the private sector in higher education provision, introduction of cost sharing in the form of graduate tax and so on to the Ethiopian higher education (FDRE, 2003).

Following these new developments, the higher education sector has enjoyed remarkable achievements particularly in terms of expansion and diversification. This expansion according to Yizengaw (2007, p. 32) took place after 1997 "in an unprecedented pace and diversification." To mention some quantitative data that may show the expansion of higher education, the number of public universities increased from two in 1998 to 33 in 2013 and they are expected to grow to 45 in the coming academic years. With respect to the private sector, more than 50 higher education institutions were accredited before the end of 2008/09. Thus, overall enrolments, which stood at less than three thousand in 1994, increased to 553,848, by 2012/13. Of these, 79, 650 enrolments were in non-government institutions and this accounts for 14.4% of the total enrolment. Consequently, the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) for higher education increased from 3.6% in 1999 to 5.7 % in 2012/2013. This means that the Ethiopian higher education now has come close to the African average in GER of 6% in 2000 (MoE, 2005, 2010, 2013; Negash, 1996; Yizengaw, 2007).

This paper presents the analysis of Ethiopia's higher education equity policy. However, it seems worth mentioning here that this analysis is challenged by the lack of a very detailed,

full-fledged equity focused policy. Therefore, the analysis relies upon what is mentioned in different publications by the government, such as higher education proclamations and general educational strategic plans. It is also complemented by information from secondary sources, such as various studies made in the area of Ethiopian higher education. The first section of the analysis focuses on examining different official publications of the government that relate to equity and this is followed by a critical examination of the equity strategies and their implications.

Equity Policy and Its Targets

As discussed in the preceding sections, access to higher education in Ethiopia has been one of the lowest in the world for several decades ever since its naissance. However, this picture has started to change over the last decade or so. Specifically, the higher education gross enrolment rate in Ethiopia is soaring unprecedentedly. However, at a time of such massive expansion, inequality in higher education remains a problem among the different groups of society (Saint, 2004; World Bank, 2003; Yizengaw, 2007). This has made the need to address equity related problems in higher education as major policy concerns.

Equity is among the major social, political and economic concerns which get political and legal attention in Ethiopia. These political and legal considerations are well reflected in the current constitution as well as in the incumbent ruling party's (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF,) programme. In its programme, the ruling party defines the issue of (in) equality mainly based on two different social groups: regions (created mainly based on ethno-lingual criteria) and gender. The issue of regional equality is at the centre of the political agenda of the ruling party in Ethiopia (EPRDF, 2005; FDRE, 1995). Gender inequality has also similar political and legal attention in which women in general are identified as a disadvantaged group in the economic, social and political system of the country. The following excerpts show what the ruling political party sought as a political programme (EPRDF, 2005):

> To ensure equality of rights and opportunities among regions so that they can achieve the optimal growth possible. …. To ensure that special capacity-building support is extended to regions disadvantaged in implementation capacity (EPRDF, 2005, Article 9.2).

> Fighting for participation on equal footing of women in political, economic and social affairs while savouring equally the benefits of economic growth (EPRDF, 2005, Article 15.5).

The political programme shows the presence of political willingness to ensure equity among what have been identified as equity groups: regions and gender. Similarly, the Republic's constitution presents the following two provisions, which take equality as a basic

constitutional right. It is stated in the Constitution that "Every Ethiopian national has the right to equal access to publicly funded social services" (FDRE, 1995, Article 41(3)).

In a more particular issue, that of gender inequality, the constitution states the need to provide affirmative action that ensures women's equality as:

> "The historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia taken into account, women, in order to remedy this legacy, are entitled to affirmative action. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions"(FDRE, 1995 Article 35(3))

The aforementioned articles from the party´s programme as well as the Constitution indicate the existence of political interest as well as legal bases to address problems related to inequality. This shows that equity related measures are politically recognized as legal rights of marginalized citizens. It is also worth mentioning that the State has a constitutional obligation to provide the necessary resources to ensure equality in all social services including education.

Based on these political and legal premises, further specific equity policies are formulated and put in place in various sectors including education. The Education and Training Policy depicts its concern over the issue of equity at all levels of education. It states that "Special attention will be given to women and to those students who did not get educational opportunities in preparation, distribution and use of educational support input" (FDRE, 1994; Article 3.7.7). The provisions of the Education and Training Policy are further translated and adapted to the different levels of education, including higher education. Accordingly, the Higher Education Proclamation calls for the sector to ensure equitable distribution among the regions. Further, it seeks to ensure equitable participation of girls, students from less developed regions and students with disabilities. The Proclamations states, "higher education shall have the objectives to…provide equitable distribution of higher education institutions" (FDRE, 2003, Article 4(9), FDRE, 2009 Article 4(9)). Although the revised Proclamation does not explicitly address equity concerns, other than in regional terms, the higher education proclamation 351/2003 endorses affirmative action in admission procedures as an equity measure. The latter policy approach of affirmative action seeks to ensure equitable access and support for women, students with disabilities and those from the less developed regions. The higher education proclamation states that:

> "Entry assessment or admission procedures designed for any female, disabled student, a student who has completed high school education in a developing region and who is native of the nationality of such region or a student from the nationality whose participation in higher education is low shall be different from others. They, shall,

during their stay in the institution, get special support; particulars of such a support shall be determined by the Ministry[3]". (2003, Article 33(1)).

The revised Proclamation also includes provisions for higher education institutions to adapt their physical and academic environment to the special needs of students with disabilities as well as in admission policies for adult learners, as will be discussed later in this section.

These policies can evidently be of great use in addressing some aspects of equity related problems in higher education. According to some studies, there is greater disparity in higher education participation among students from different regions (Wondemu, 2004). The World Bank has also identified these regional imbalances as issues that require governmental priority while expanding higher education. The Bank suggests political instability to be a potential implication of failing to do so. It argues that "If these [regional] inequities are left unattended, the seeds of political instability might begin to germinate over the longer term" (World Bank, 2003, p. 14).

Similarly, identifying women's underrepresentation and historical exclusion from social, economic and political developments seems to get due attention in the legal and policy documents quoted above. All research in the area vividly indicate, regardless of recent developments, the significant gender disparity in higher education participation and completion (MoE, 2002, 2010; Saint, 2004; Wondemu, 2004; World Bank, 2003; Yizengaw, 2007). These findings indeed make it clear that there needs to be policies that address both regional and gender disparity. The revised Higher Education Proclamation has also clearly indicated the need to consider students with special needs in higher education (FDRE, 2009).

However, identifying only these three groups (region, gender and disability) can be critiqued for inadequately addressing the multifaceted inequality problems in Ethiopia. Apart from regional and gender disparity, studies by the World Bank (Saint, 2004; Yizengaw, 2007) uncover significant inequality in higher education participation based on other variables such as economic class. The World Bank, for instance, reveals that in 1999 "71% of tertiary students come from households in the top income quintile" (2003, p. 14). In addition to disparities based on socioeconomic classes, age is not included as an important equity group in policy statements. Having explored/outlined a history of limited educational accessibility in Ethiopia until recently, it is evident that a significant number of citizens have been denied access to higher education after completing secondary school. These citizens are now adult members of the society who need to be taken into consideration by all kinds of equity-related policies. Failing to do so does nothing but sustain their exclusion from higher education (Schuller, 2003). These two examples indicate how narrowly equity groups are defined or some important equity groups are missed out entirely or understated in the policy documents. Moreover, even the way regions are defined as important equity groups in the Proclamation, is ambiguous and perhaps misleading. The study by the World Bank (2003) explains the

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[3] Ministry of Education

geographical disparity in a more sensible way by showing that the regional difference are more visible between urban and rural areas, where the urban areas of relatively developed regions seem to be more advantaged. This explanation is sensible, given that it is likely that people from urban areas have a better chance to access higher education than the majority of rural people from the so-called developed regions. Therefore, the gross region/ethnic based definition of equity groups is ambiguous in its definition and perhaps misleading, as it may lead to favour the already advantaged groups of a society, like those from big cities of the so-called underdeveloped regions.

Based on the forgoing discussions it is evident that equity as a social policy issue in general and as a higher education policy issue in particular has both political attention and legal bases. The political interest, however, seems to go beyond laying the ground to significantly influence the way the equity issue is defined in higher education in Ethiopia. Particularly, defining regions as equity groups reflects the current ethnic/region based political orientation in the country. This, in turn, ensures equitable social and economic developments among the region as a major political agenda. The same influence seems to be reflected in policies meant to address higher education inequalities in Ethiopia.

Equity Strategy, Challenges and Consequences

In order to address the inequalities in Ethiopia's higher education as well as to make the sector more just, the Ethiopian government has put different strategies in place. These strategies mainly focus on expanding and diversifying higher education and affirmative action during admission (FDRE, 2003, 2009; MoE, 2002; Yizengaw, 2007). This section examines these strategies and their implications in the higher education sector in general.

Limited access has been identified as a major source of inequalities observed in Ethiopian higher education as the previous elitist system only favoured those who were highly competitive (MoE, 2002; Yizengaw, 2007). As it is well argued in the previous sections, merit based competiveness is not always necessarily fair (Sen, 1992, 2009; Sobrinho, 2008). Based on the same premises, the government is determined to address equity issues mainly through expanding the sector so that more students from all groups of society would have better access to higher education(MoE, 2002; Yizengaw, 2007). The expansion of higher education is facilitated by the government's commitment to increase the intake capacity of existing institutions and to establish new public universities, the participation of private providers, and expansion of alternative provisions, such as distance education (Saint, 2004; Teshome, 2009; Yizengaw, 2007).

Expanding higher education certainly results in an increment in the total number of students, which will in turn help to increase the number of students from even historically underrepresented groups. For example, the total number of female students in Ethiopian higher education increased from 7,282 in the academic year 1995/96 to 553,848 by the academic year 2012/13 (MoE, 2013; Yizengaw, 2007). However, as the issue of equity is basically based on analysis of the relative participation of different social groups, the

participation pattern indicates further inequalities regardless of the quantitative gains. In this line of analysis, the share of female students grows only to 30.0 % from 20.8% over the same period (MoE, 2013; Yizengaw, 2007). This shows that although expansion can create more space in the higher education institutions to accept more diverse students, the share of female students remains significantly low. In other words, unless mechanisms to redress and control inequalities among the different social groups are in place, the contribution of expanding and diversifying higher education will do little to address equity issues.

Moreover, expansion is conceptualized as the means to ensure equity among the different federal states/regions of Ethiopia. The Higher Education Proclamation identifies the need to ensure equitable distribution of public universities among the regions of the country (FDRE, 2003, 2009). This leads to one of the most prevalent phenomena of today's higher education in Ethiopia- the mushrooming of new public higher education institutions in different regions of the country (MoE, 2010; Teshome, 2009; Yizengaw, 2007). In addition to the existing thirty two public universities, Ethiopia is establishing eleven new ones in different regions with the objectives of having one university to two million population and ensuring equitable distribution of higher education institutions among regions and improving the intake capacities of its higher education sector.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that such expansions may play a very small role in improving the actual equity of students from the underrepresented groups of society. This is not by disregarding the various contributions higher education institutions can play by their presence in different parts of the country. They, in fact, play different important roles for the social and economic development of the regions where they are located through research and services. However, the institutions' location plays a very limited role in guaranteeing that local students have better advantages, since admission and placement to higher education takes place centrally by the MoE (FDRE, 2003, 2009). The Ministry decides the cutting point for admission in public and private institutions and decides the placements within public higher education institutions centrally. Students from all over the country are considered altogether for placement in each academic year. Therefore, the location of higher education institutions seems to be a less decisive factor per se in ensuring equitable participation. It appears, however, that such policy provisions are meant to address equity among the different regions in possessing public institutions. Indeed, availability does not guarantee access.

In addition, expanding higher education through private providers most likely favours only those who can afford to pay the tuition. Moreover, as these institutions are concentrated in urban areas they are more easily accessible to urban dwellers (Yizengaw, 2007). Therefore, despite their tremendous contribution in expanding higher education, the involvement of private providers, at least potentially, can aggravate the inequality by favouring only those who are economically strong and from urban areas. The issue of affordability needs to be taken into consideration in relation to distance education as well, while it is accessible to students of remote areas, it is highly dependent on the development of infrastructure.

Affirmative action is another policy initiative that is meant to redress the problems of the underrepresented groups of society in higher education and ensuring their success. The higher education proclamation 351/2003 specifically identified women, students with disabilities, and those from underdeveloped regions to have a different/lower admission points (FDRE, 2003). However, in the revised Proclamation, the groups are left undefined and the Proclamation gives the responsibility to do so to the Council of Ministers as stated below:

> "…there shall be special admissions procedures for disadvantaged citizens to be determined by regulation of the Council of Ministers and to be implemented by directive of the Ministry [of Education]…"(FDRE, 2009 Article 39.4)

The provision given to the Council of Ministers seems to be putting ambiguity in defining the equity groups in higher education as it is not yet publicly identified and communicated. This certainly opens, at least potentially, room for political manoeuvres and lack of clear accountability. In the same Proclamation, however, there is a provision that refers to admission of adult learners. It reads:

> "A public institution may admit adults under special admissions procedures to be issued pursuant to the establishment regulations of the institution and as the institution's senate may determine; and the Ministry may extend the applicability of this provision to private institutions as circumstances may permit."(FDRE, 2009, p. Article 39.35).

Although age is not identified as an equity group in many of the documents, such recent developments might indicate growing concern in the area. However, it remains to be further investigated why adult learners are identified as the ones that need special admission while other groups are left to be defined by the Council of Ministers.

The revised Proclamation, furthermore, provides details about the need for institutions to make their physical environment and academic programmes adaptable to students with disabilities. It suggests that institutions shall make facilities and their programmes 'amenable' to use by students with physical disabilities. It also states that institutions shall provide educational support materials, develop alternative testing procedures and so on (FDRE, 2009, pp. Article 40.41-44). Such policy initiatives to make the whole physical and academic environment adaptable to students with special needs plays a vital role in promoting equity in participation and success of students with disabilities in higher education.

However, based on the provision of the 351/2003 proclamation, females, students with disabilities and students from less developed regions (namely Afar, Benishangul Gumuz, Gambella and Somali) are admitted to public higher education institutions by affirmative action regulations lowering the entry point for admission to higher education for these groups of students (Wondemu, 2004; Yizengaw, 2007). Some studies in this area recognize the contribution of such affirmative action during admission procedures for the identified groups in increasing their participation. Notwithstanding, some positive contribution in addressing

higher education inequalities, affirmative action procedures seem inadequate as well as insufficient to make higher education equitable. The inadequacy of the affirmative action programmes is related to the very nature of the equity policy in Ethiopia that narrowly (perhaps ambiguously) defines the equity groups that are eligible to the affirmative action procedures.

Its insufficiency is manifested as it focuses on mainly admission, in other words providing equitable access to the already identified groups of society (except the recent development with provisions for affirmative action to students with disabilities). As is discussed thoroughly in the previous sections, addressing inequalities by focusing only on provision of equitable access does very little to address overall inequality issues in higher education. In this regard, some studies reveal that a significant proportion of students who join higher education institutions through affirmative action procedures tend to fail to complete their studies (Wondemu, 2004; Yizengaw, 2007). Failing to retain and ensure the success of students who join higher education is "tantamount to denying the access to higher education" (Yizengaw, 2007, p. 71).

Poor retention and lower completion rates of students who join higher education institutions through affirmative action is a function of different factors (Wondemu, 2004; Yizengaw, 2007). It starts from their relatively inadequate preparation to fit in with the regular programmes and compete with students with relatively better preparation. Prejudice about these students from their colleagues, as well as from faculty members, has also been identified as a factor that contributes to the problem. Lack of clear institutionalized efforts to support these students during their stay in higher education institutions is another factor fuelling prejudices and sending mixed messages to students as threats to quality (Yizengaw, 2007). Such resistances have a pervasive effect on some of the challenges mentioned above. All these and other challenges faced by students who join higher education institutions as a result of affirmative action, makes it clear that an affirmative action policy that focuses only on making access equitable is insufficient.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine and understand the Ethiopian higher education equity policy issues. Therefore, the review of literature conducted regarding higher education equity issues as a basis to analyse diverse policy provisions and research papers in order to examine in depth how the Ethiopian higher education equity policies are conceptualized and presented.

The analysis indicates that there are serious concerns over issues of equity in Ethiopian higher education. It also indicates that although the issue of equity is well acknowledged in the political rhetoric and has strong legal bases, equity issues do not seem to get due attention in higher education policies except for some fragmented indications in different documents. Moreover, it is argued that the policy on equity is ambiguous and short-sighted, with inadequate attention given to the way in which equity is defined and conceptualized.

The analysis of this study reveals the Ethiopian higher education equity policy provisions to have problems of inadequacy, ambiguity and short-sightedness both in defining the equity groups, as well as in the strategies to redress the problems. Only a few equity groups (region and gender) are taken into consideration although limited types of disability and age have appeared to some extent with recent developments. However, apart from being very limited in identifying equity groups, those identified (for example, regions) are also ambiguous. The strategies also appear to be inadequate and short-sighted. Expansion of higher education is one of the strategies provided in Ethiopia that, if not supported by other relevant policies, has the potential to reproduce inequality. It is also well argued that the expansion which, according to FDRE (1995, 2003), is provided to be equitably distributed among regions, as one equity measure plays a very small role in ensuring equitable access and participation. Moreover, expanding higher education through private providers in the Ethiopian context where socioeconomic barriers are strong (World Bank, 2003) can potentially reproduce inequalities by favouring the economically able and mostly students from the urban areas. Equity strategies that only focus on access, despite the very few and general indications on the need for affirmative action on further support, shows the extent to which the strategies are short-sighted.

Nevertheless, the analysis also shows some degree of contribution of equity strategies in addressing higher education inequality problems (through affirmative action admission policies). However, the students who join higher education institutions through affirmative action (through lower entry points) are facing various obstacles to achieve equitable participation and academic success.

These problems clearly indicate that it is very important to embrace broader concepts of equity that involve equity in access, participation and success (Martin, 2010; OECD, 2008) among the different social groups with comprehensive and adequate policy measures, if meaningful equity, and as a result, social justice is to be achieved.

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