

# Transnational Diaspora Engagements in Higher Education: A Case of Ethiopian-born Academics in the US

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## **Abstract**

The literature on diaspora engagement in higher education focuses on broad environmental, policy and institutional issues as critical determinants of the scope and efficiency of engagement. Using data from interviews with 16 Ethiopian diaspora academics in the United States, this article undertakes a micro-examination of factors in their personal spaces and immediate environment that influence such engagement. Using a phenomenological approach, it examines how professional, personal, familial and other individual attributes shape the trajectories of diaspora engagement. It demonstrates how nuances in personal and micro-environmental factors shape motivation for, and sustenance of, engagement, while they maintain a complex and interdependent relationship. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of a holistic approach to the study of diaspora engagement in higher education that pays attention to personal and micro-environmental factors as well as institutional, legal and political issues.

**Key words:** Ethiopia, Ethiopian diaspora, diaspora engagement, higher education, transnational engagement

La littérature sur l'engagement de la diaspora dans l'enseignement supérieur se concentre sur les grandes questions environnementales, politiques et institutionnelles en tant que déterminants critiques de la portée et de l'efficacité de l'engagement. En utilisant les données d'entretiens avec 16 universitaires de la diaspora éthiopienne aux États-Unis, cet article entreprend un micro-examen des facteurs dans leurs espaces personnels et dans leur environnement immédiat qui influencent un tel engagement.

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A l'aide d'une approche phénoménologique, il examine comment les attributs professionnels, personnels, familiaux et autres façonnent les trajectoires de l'engagement de la diaspora. Il montre comment les nuances des facteurs personnels et micro-environnementaux façonnent la motivation et le maintien de l'engagement, tout en maintenant une relation complexe et interdépendante. L'article conclut en soulignant l'importance d'une approche holistique de l'étude de l'engagement de la diaspora dans l'enseignement supérieur qui prête attention aux facteurs personnels et micro-environnementaux ainsi qu'aux questions institutionnelles, juridiques et politiques.

**Mots clés:** Éthiopie, diaspora éthiopienne, engagement de la diaspora, enseignement supérieur, engagement transnational

### Introduction

Previous studies (e.g., Amagoh and Rahman, 2016; Foulds and Zeleza, 2014; Ogachi, 2016; Teferra, 2003, 2010; Zeleza, 2004, 2013) have examined the potential and benefits of diaspora engagement in African higher education and advocated for African scholars based outside the continent to step up such involvement. However, much of the literature focuses on broad policy issues and challenges to the realisation of the academic diaspora's potential. There has been little exploration of the actual experiences of diaspora academics.

This article investigates factors in diaspora academics' personal spaces that shape their transnational engagement, and how. While acknowledging the importance of broader institutional, policy and other environmental forces, it argues that these academics' background, experiences and personal attributes are worthy of equal consideration as they determine decisions to become engaged as well as their interaction with various aspects of the broader environment. Due to differences in their personal attitudes and resources, individuals that are engaged in the same environment forge different relationships with that environment. They thus derive different experiences from their engagement, which, in turn, inform their motivation and persistence. Drawing on data from Ethiopian academic diaspora in the United States (US), the article aims to better understand the anatomy of diaspora engagement in higher education by exploring these factors.

The article begins with a discussion on the Ethiopian academic diaspora in the US. This is followed by the methodological approach employed; the research participants' characteristics; and the various factors that shape their engagement experiences. A summary and discussion of the findings is followed by conclusions.

### Ethiopian Academic Diaspora in the US

Different sources estimate the size of the Ethiopian diaspora in the US at between a quarter and two million. Numbers aside, in 2014, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) reported that this diaspora community is on par with the general US population in terms of educational attainment. About 20% of the Ethiopians in the US, aged 25 or above, have a bachelor's degree, with 12% holding a master's degree, PhD, or an advanced professional degree (MPI, 2014). Although accurate data is not available, it is believed that a significant number of Ethiopian-born academics work in various US universities and colleges.

In 2012, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reported that, at a conservative estimate, there were about 1,600 PhD holders among the Ethiopian diaspora in the US and Canada. It can be assumed that: (a) a significant number of these would likely be employed by universities; (b) given Ethiopians' emigration patterns, a significant majority are likely to be based in the US; and (c) considering that the emigration of educated Ethiopians increased in the past few years and that the return rate of Ethiopians who study in foreign universities is generally low, it is reasonable to expect a sharp increase in this number since the publication of the report.

For the purposes of this article, the term Ethiopian academic diaspora (or Ethiopian and Ethiopian born academics) in the US is understood to constitute Ethiopians and naturalised US citizens who were born and raised in Ethiopia and currently hold academic positions in US institutions. The important denominator is that they have been socialised as Ethiopians to the socio-cultural norms which foreground the relationship between the individual research participant and Ethiopian higher education. By academic, I mean anyone who holds a teaching or research position in any higher education institution regardless of rank, status of employment or the type of institution.

### Methodology

Given that the study sought to understand how the Ethiopian academic diaspora in the US engages with universities in Ethiopia, and how that engagement is framed by factors in their personal spaces, their own conception of the process and experiences with engagement were central to the inquiry. A phenomenological research design was appropriate as it enabled the study participants to describe, interpret and critically self-reflect on their own engagement (Rossman and Rallis, 2012; Vagle, 2018). Phenomenological research enables understanding of a phenomenon through the eyes of those who have direct experience of it. Its epistemological pursuit tends to focus on meaning and understanding, rather than

developing abstractions and theory (Flood, 2010; Van Manen, 1990).

Data was collected through in-depth phenomenological interviews with 16 participants, who were selected using snowball sampling and the criterion of having robust experience of engagement with Ethiopian higher education institutions. Following Seidman (2006) the interviews consisted of three components, focusing first on the context of the experience, then reconstructing the experience itself, and finally allowing participants to reflect and explore the meaning of their experience. Multi-step thematic data analysis was employed, supported by a qualitative data analysis tool, NVivo 12.

### Migration Trajectories

The research participants (RP) arrived in the US over a long period of time (the earliest in 1971 and the latest in 2008) under different circumstances. This has a strong relevance to their transnational engagement. Not only is it indicative of their career stability and family situations, but, as Kebede (2012) notes, it also reflects on generational differences that affect the decision to move to and/or stay in the US, and ultimately their socialisation in the host country and relationship with the home country. During this period, the circumstances under which transnational engagement took place changed considerably in both the US and Ethiopia. For example, US immigration laws and racial dynamics in academia changed, while the political atmosphere and the size and development of higher education evolved in Ethiopia.

While not mutually exclusive, Arthur (2000) identifies four reasons why Africans migrate to the US, namely, educational pursuits, economic reasons, to join family, and fleeing political repression. Thirteen of the research participants came to the US to pursue further studies, while two came through family connections and one won the Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery.

**Table 1.** Patterns of Arrival in the US (n=16)

|     | Time of Arrival |       |       |       | Type of Entry |        |    | To the US    |        |
|-----|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|---------------|--------|----|--------------|--------|
|     | 1970s           | 1980s | 1990s | 2000s | Study         | Family | DV | After Europe | Direct |
| No. | 4               | 6     | 3     | 3     | 13            | 2      | 1  | 6            | 10     |

Those who arrived in the US in the early 1970s, share similar stories. They came through US government scholarship programmes with the permission and support of the Ethiopian government. However, before they completed their (master's level) studies, the 1974 revolution changed the political environment, forcing them to stay longer despite their strong

desire to return. Political developments also affected their academic and career trajectories. As RP10 jokingly remarked, he was almost 'forced' into doing his PhD. They decided to continue their studies while they were waiting for things back home to improve. Those who arrived in the US in the 1980s and later also wanted to return home. During those years, only a small number of Ethiopians pursued higher education abroad. Having been accorded this privilege, they had a strong sense of responsibility to return home and serve their country.

In contrast, most of the participants that came to the US in the 1990s and 2000s were attracted by the academic and career opportunities it offered. Four of the six participants that fell into this category lived and studied in Europe before moving to the US. They agreed that it is fair to say that they came to the US having considered the possibility of staying on a long-term basis.

Over time, the participants who moved to the US for educational purposes made a deliberate decision to remain in the country after completing their studies. Besides socio-political circumstances, this could reflect academics' increased global mobility enabled by technological changes and advanced communication that are the hallmarks of globalisation (Alexander, 2017; Butler, 2001).

### Why Engage with Ethiopia?

Given the challenges they confront in both their engagement with Ethiopian universities and in their careers and personal lives in the US, I asked the participants what motivated their initial and on-going commitment to Ethiopia.

#### Professional Reasons

Passion for one's profession, and the desire for it to develop across different geographic areas, was identified as a strong driver. RP14 said: "Generally, I am interested in engineering and science education. And especially I'm passionate about providing good undergraduate education, irrespective of where. That is one reason I am involved in all of this." When RP04 visited Ethiopia, he noted that students were following an "outdated" curriculum. He remarked:

When I saw what they were teaching them I noticed that it is the same thing I studied a long time ago when I was a student there. But that is no longer taught elsewhere; it is outdated... Students learn only theories and they graduate without getting any practice...I was concerned about that.

On the other hand, transnational engagement positively impacts one's professional development. An assistant professor on a tenure track, RP09

noted that. “Evaluation for tenure is based on teaching, research and service. I can consider this [his engagement with Ethiopian institutions] as service.” Senior professors concurred. RP15 noted that transnational activities, especially through prestigious and competitive scholarships like the Fulbright, are important for promotion, although by the time he received a Fulbright he was already tenured and a full professor.

Consistent with the literature (Leask, 2013; Proctor, 2015; Rumbley and De Wit, 2019), RP10 said that his international engagement enriches his teaching: “It is also very useful for your teaching and for your students. You will be able to bring them your diverse experiences, not just what you read, but also what you know practically. That makes the class more interesting.”

Two points can be noted. Firstly, professional development is not always the priority, as most of the research participants were tenured professors. For those that were not yet tenured, this was also not the only goal. After acknowledging that he could use his engagement with Ethiopia to secure promotion, RP09 remarked that this was not his main motivation. Secondly, professional factors are not necessarily tied to one’s country of birth, and therefore do not explain the specific focus on Ethiopia. Several participants noted that they occasionally engaged with countries other than Ethiopia. However, Ethiopia was their priority with far more intensive, persistent and deliberate engagement.

#### Social and Cultural Connections

The possibility of combining social and professional activities in one trip was a clear reason for the Ethiopian academic diaspora to prefer Ethiopia for international engagement. Several participants confirmed that they planned professional engagements when they travelled to Ethiopia for social or personal reasons, or vice versa. Although it was not successful, RP06’s application for a Fulbright scholarship is a good example:

Back in 2005/06 I was hoping to spend my sabbatical in Ethiopia. I waited for seven years since becoming a fulltime faculty to apply for Fulbright. I was in contact with Addis Ababa University (AAU) to be my host. But Fulbright called me and told me that they did not get a strong response from AAU. They asked me if I wanted to go to other African countries. I said I only wanted to go to Ethiopia. You know, that was the plan, to take my wife and my sons. I wanted my sons to spend one school year in Ethiopia, to learn the language and the culture of their parents. So that was where I wanted to go, not anywhere else. But it did not work out.

RP13, who had worked with institutions in a few countries in Africa, noted that her social and cultural capital made it easier to work with Ethiopian

institutions. She said that she used her personal contacts in the country to make connections and get things going. Other participants noted that their uncomfortable social and professional life in the US made them appreciate their acceptance in Ethiopia. RP12 remarked:

Over here in the US you are always being questioned; you are always ‘the other’; you are always the foreigner. Making a bigger impact is limited by those deficiencies... My name alone will generate questions...

So, you are always being second guessed. In Ethiopia, you do it in full.

The lack of social and cultural belonging in the US reinforces attachment to the home country. One way of strengthening this attachment, is through professional engagement. Given the many unfulfilled needs in Ethiopia, engagement with institutions in the home country is also often more productive, giving rise to enhanced professional satisfaction.

#### Love of Country

Expressed in different ways, love of country was a common theme in all my conversations with the research participants. Many said that love for their country and commitment to serving society were values they grew up with. RP03 recalled how his childhood conversations with his father about patriotism and love of country shaped him while RP11 said that, as the oldest of 11 siblings, she learned the importance of service from helping her mother do chores. Furthermore, at a time when prevailing norms did not attach value to girls having a career, her progressive father encouraged her to take her education seriously, telling her that she could use it to help her country.

Other participants reported being inspired by reading and hearing stories from teachers, community elders and family members. Many recognised that their success is the product of the people who helped them along the way.

#### If Not Me, Then Who?

Given that they received free education in Ethiopia from kindergarten to college, ten of the research participants said that they feel ‘indebted’. This speaks to the debate on free higher education, particularly whether it should be considered a public or private good (Hensley et al., 2013; Marginson, 2007, 2011). Provision of free higher education is commonly considered as grounded in its public nature. This implies that whoever receives free higher education is expected to pay back by, among other means, serving and paying tax. This is reflected in the views of the research participants. As RP14 commented: “Wherever I am now, I spent my formative years in Ethiopia, I was educated at no cost and I still identify myself as an Ethiopian. I feel like I am indebted, and I need to pay back”. RP05 said:

We had free education at the expense of the taxpayers, most of whom were very poor. Even today more than 85% of the Ethiopian population lives in rural areas, mostly uneducated, and barely making a living. But they pay taxes with which they offer us free education. You would realise the importance of this especially when you come here and see how much people pay for education, when you see the burden of debt graduates come out of college with... Well, if we have received such generosity from the older generation, we should also pass it on to the next one with all the knowledge and the expertise we have.

Some participants added that, even if they had paid for their education, their sense of duty to serve would remain unchanged as education is only one aspect of a person's formation. For instance, RP11 stressed that many people make sacrifices for a few to succeed.

Some of the research participants drew a connection between their sense of duty and personal experiences. RP07 remembered that, in high school, he had to get to the school library as early as 5:00 am to queue for a two hours to use a text book. Going to Europe and seeing the abundance of books and other resources motivated him "to be in service of others". Having experienced a resource constrained learning environment, these diaspora academics were driven to try and make it easier for others.

On a broader scale, some participants said that they were motivated by political issues in Ethiopia. RP11 shared:

Everything is ethnicised these days, even the universities. It is becoming a source of so much violence. I never knew such a thing growing up... I hate it, it is terrible... So, I thought to myself: what can I do about it? I know what I can do might not change a lot, but it is better than simply sitting and being unhappy about it forever.

RP09 noted the decline in the quality of education in Ethiopia: "If we, those who are educated, do not do anything about it, then there is no point in complaining." RP10 concurred: "When we were in university, we marched for the causes of the public. That was what the student movement was all about... There is no reason we should stop so far as those problems persist... but maybe not in the same way." The underlying idea is that as the educated elite of the country, diaspora academics could leverage their position to engage with the country – through universities and beyond – to contribute to addressing its major problems.

While, in general, the participants felt a duty to give back, the question of where to focus one's efforts is determined by personal, social, cultural, intellectual, and political factors. This question is, however, philosophical as much as it is practical. For instance, does it make more sense to devote one's efforts to a country with which one has some connection, or one that is most in need? RP13 grappled with this dilemma as follows:

Because so many people contribute to the country that is close to them and not necessarily the one that is the neediest, if Ethiopians in the diaspora don't contribute to Ethiopia, then no one else will. And therefore, it will be left out. Because, you know, the Mexican Americans are going to be contributing to Mexico and the Nigerians in Germany are going to be contributing to Nigeria... because there is that nationalism sort of ingrained throughout the world, then in a way one has no choice but to also be somewhat nationalistic. Otherwise, your country of origin will be left out... The other thing is that I can speak Amharic and I can travel the countryside with reasonable ease. I can get doors open to me in Ethiopia, in a way that I could not if I tried to contribute to other countries, right? So, I might as well leverage what I have by contributing to Ethiopia... Philosophically I am of the view that we should contribute ... to the neediest country. But I also see that my effectiveness is going to be highest in Ethiopia., and if people like me do not contribute to Ethiopia, because other people do not have the same view of the world as I do, then Ethiopia would get left behind.

Inherent in this dilemma is the tension between the diaspora's strong ties with and commitment to the home country (Cohen, 2008; Safran, 1991), and the notion of borderless knowledge. While diasporic nationalism can be articulated within the global knowledge diaspora who engage in cross-cultural and cross-national interactions (Kim, 2011), it is becoming a strong theme in the global arena. This is exacerbated by the growing sense of populism – with nativism at its core – which is challenging the global knowledge economy (Roberts, 2009) by creating barriers to free mobility of knowledge and people, including students and academics (Altbach and De Wit, 2017; Hammond, 2016; Mathies and Weimer, 2018). However, it can be argued that this tension is not entirely negative as it can generate stronger ties between (developing) countries and their knowledge diaspora, ultimately leading to better engagement outcomes.

#### Outcomes of Engagement

The anticipated and realised outcomes of engagement efforts constitute a further set of incentives that shape motivation for engagement. Several participants noted that the outcomes of their engagement, such as the number of graduate students they advised, the number of people they trained, the classes they taught, the resources they mobilised, and successful conferences and seminars that they organised, motivated them to continue. They added that what they achieved in Ethiopia was more attractive and meaningful than what they could do in the US. RP01 remarked:

This country has all the expertise you can think of, so unless you have a uniquely new idea, a groundbreaking one, you have little to no



chance of making recognisable impact with what you do. In Ethiopia, everything is new, there is a lot to be done. You can really make a huge impact with small effort.

RP12's statement that, "there is no greater joy in life than impacting somebody else's life" points to the emotional satisfaction gained by the Ethiopian diaspora's transnational engagement. However, such engagement also has emotional and financial costs and can be a source of frustration, dissatisfaction and embarrassment. RP01 said:

Sometimes you have to scale down your ambition because the reception you get from the other side does not match your aspiration. I have tried to work with several faculty members in Ethiopia and I noticed that their priorities do not match my motivation to engage with them. It is hard to find someone who goes beyond what is expected of them... And it is important that you go in their pace, you don't want to stretch things too much...I feel very bad that I could not have contributed as much as I want due to this and other reasons.

It is also not uncommon for diaspora academics to be accused of pursuing personal gain. RP12 recalled that he was accused of squandering public money when he invited 15 professors from different countries to participate in a conference which included the launching of a PhD programme they had helped develop for an Ethiopian institution. He recalled "I literally cried. But when the conference started and they saw what has been done they came and apologised to me".

Some research participants went out of their way to convince their American colleagues to support academic initiatives in Ethiopia, but sometimes there was no satisfactory response from the Ethiopian side. In addition to the emotional cost, this damages the social capital and professional credibility of those involved.

#### Brain Drain, What Brain Drain?

Given that brain drain is deemed a serious problem in many developing countries, including Ethiopia (Docquier et al., 2007), I asked the research participants if they regarded themselves as part of it. This question was asked in the context of discussions on their motivations to engage. The responses can be categorised into three groups. The first group acknowledged that brain drain is a real problem and considered themselves as part of the phenomenon. RP02 said:

I teach about brain drain in class. I give these ... examples about China, India, Greece, and about the impact of the European free trade agreement on smaller East European countries etc. and I feel too self-conscious not to mention myself. So, I give an example of myself as a product of brain drain... It is not a good feeling, but you know...

He then listed personal and economic reasons why he found it difficult to return home and noted that this was one of the reasons he tried to contribute from afar. Others shared similar thoughts. Three respondents used phrases equivalent to 'living in regret' to describe their situation. RP09 noted that most of his classmates had left Ethiopia and that those who remained were often in non-government jobs that were not directly related to their training. He remarked that, from a cohort of 63, "maybe seven or eight of them are still doing what they are supposed to do."

The second group of respondents acknowledged brain drain, but added that it is a global reality, not necessarily a problem. RP06 noted:

When I study physics, I do not necessarily think of a particular country, I think of contributing to the whole world to the betterment of humanity. Through physics research, we can discover new science that will be implemented into technology sooner or later for the betterment of society as a whole. Your phone for example has some components of the invention from my research or that of my colleagues. What we do is put into use in improving health, communication, agriculture, etc. across the globe. So, there is that international aspect. But there are also ways of helping one's own country while you are within or outside ... I do feel that I have to contribute to the country which gave me free education.

When I pointed out that the US will be the primary owner of the technology and inventions that emanate from his research, he responded: "But I am doing the research here. I wouldn't have been able to do this kind of research if I were in Ethiopia. I simply could not have the resources". This, and the fact that they try to give back to Ethiopia, was a common argument. Some of the participants in this group maintained that they are making significant contributions to Ethiopia, and that to regard them as 'drained brain' is unfair.

The third group consisted of participants that either fell somewhere in the middle, or did not see the relevance of the question. RP01 said that, while he recognised brain drain as a serious problem and that he was part of it, he embraced his circumstances because he was compensating for what Ethiopia has lost: "The fact that I am here is not necessarily a brain drain as long as I am connected to my country and I am doing what I can to help others."

RP13 said that she was always asked when she would return to Ethiopia, but she considered this a "nonissue":

There is much going on in the current era, I mean, people have now started to use this term brain circulation as opposed to brain drain. Communications are easier, travel is easier... So, it doesn't even make sense to talk about someone as being here or there. You know, we're all

in the quantum state of two places at the same time...So I would just really hope that the people on the other side could think of other ways of engagement than me, you know, living in Addis Ababa where I can't do any of the things that I can do here.

Overall, the research participants felt that they would not have been where they were in their career had they not come to the US and decided to stay. Furthermore, their current position enabled them to engage with Ethiopian universities. It is worth noting that most of those that acknowledged brain drain as a problem were from the social sciences. This could be because research in the natural sciences is facility and technology dependent and the participants in these fields were able to access such in the US. In contrast, social science fields are context heavy and in most cases practice and research in the US have limited relevance in addressing problems in Ethiopia.

#### Personal Circumstances

Personal circumstances also played a part in shaping, enabling or challenging the success of the participants' engagement initiatives. These include children's education and the need to be involved in their lives. Younger participants said that their children's education had been a factor in their decision to travel to Ethiopia. On two occasions, RP06 wanted to spend his sabbatical in Ethiopia at times that were conducive to his children's education, although neither worked out. The first time his sons were in kindergarten and he wanted them to spend a year in Ethiopia learning their parents' language and culture. The second time he applied his children were in middle school. He said: "that was a transitional time, so it wouldn't have been a problem to take them. Now they are in high school and I want them to stay stable until they finish". Similarly, RP01 and RP02 emphasised that they had a well-established routine that revolved around the education of their children, which significantly reduces their flexibility to travel.

This became more complicated when the participants had administrative responsibilities. RP03 took up the chair of his department while raising two small children and also traveling to Ethiopia to teach courses. He said: "I could not refuse the chair, so I had to pause my travels to Ethiopia". RP02 reported a similar experience.

The more senior research participants stated that, given that their children had gone to, or completed, college, they had more time and flexibility to travel. RP10 explained that he was so focused on his career that he married and started a family late in life. "So, until the kids went to college, I really had very limited options of traveling".

Some of the participants that could not travel due to family circumstances turned to forms of engagement that harnessed technology. For instance,

RP01 said that supervising graduate students, as opposed to teaching courses, suited his circumstances:

My younger daughter is 13 and she spends a lot of time with me. I want to spend as much time with her as I can. So, traveling is really difficult. But advising students is flexible; I manage my time so I will spare some hours for reading and commenting on the papers. Of course, it competes with my research time and it is a lot of work given the poor writing and research skills of the students. But I have managed to take two students every year for the last seven or eight years.

Appropriate technology can enable engagement, including teaching courses without having to travel to Ethiopia. One of the aims of the STEM Network (a network of diaspora academics in the US and elsewhere) is to build an online resource where members can create content in the form of videos, notes, exercises, etc., and to livestream lectures. However, this plan has not materialised due to different reasons, not least of which is poor technological infrastructure in Ethiopia.

Financial constraints also hamper engagement. These include the opportunity cost of time that could have been spent on income generating activities, and covering one's own expenses when funding is not forthcoming. Most participants agreed that, on completing one's studies, the primary focus is securing one's career and economic stability, which go together.

Conducive family circumstances and financial stability often converge in the later years of one's career, and more so after retirement. Three of the research participants indicated that they were considering resettling and working with universities in Ethiopia after their retirement. With their children having completed college, and having secured their pensions, they could set up base in Ethiopia and travel to the US when necessary.

#### Race Relations in the Home Institution

The overall environment of the institution in which the research participants were employed also impacted on their transnational engagement. While the institutional environment covers many factors, the participants' experience of race relations was a common theme. Research shows that racism has always been a negative force in the American higher education environment (Harper, 2012; Hutchison, 2016). Whether it takes the form of blatant discriminatory practices or micro-aggression, it negatively affects the quality of experiences and the success of both students and faculty (Kim and Kim, 2010).

A common experience among the research participants was that their abilities were constantly questioned. They were simply assumed to be incapable of doing their jobs properly. RP01, whose first faculty position was in a Southern institution, recalled how he struggled to fit in. Having studied

in the Northern US, his difficulty in understanding the Southern accent contributed to his challenges. He added:

Despite having publications and years of experience as a teacher back in Ethiopia, and research skills perhaps better than my colleagues at the same career stage, just because I look and speak different no one asked me to be on their committee, let alone be their chair. The next year as students slowly come to me for advice, they started to see how I support them and that I actually can do it... Then people start to line up... But it was different when I came to the DC area. This is diverse, it is a cosmopolitan area and people have a much better awareness on racial relations.

RP09, who completed his PhD in northern Europe before moving to the US for post-doctoral studies, said that he realised the subtle nature of racism after he came to the US. He acknowledged that Europe is not perfect, but said that it was more visible in the US:

It took me quite some time to prove myself as a researcher. My boss was a smart guy with a lot of international exposure. He has had several international students and post docs. I did not have any problem with him. But the colleagues I worked with in the lab were condescending.

It took me some time to prove that I am equally qualified to be there.

Racism has different layers. Being a foreigner adds to the challenge of being a person of colour. Language skills, accent, limited understanding of cultural norms, etc., add to the conundrum. Being a woman makes things even more complicated. RP13's case illustrates this complexity:

I think it's well known that there's biases against people of color, biases against women, and for me in particular, I look young too...When I go to conferences it is not unusual that people simply assume I am some grad student interning with the organisers...So when someone looks down on me or behaves in a certain bad way, I don't know which bias is at play. Maybe all at a time. But I have given up trying to figure out.

It is fair to point out that the situation is not all doom and gloom. For instance, RP15 was hired by a department chaired by a foreign-born faculty, who protected him in many ways in his early career. Similarly, RP14 belongs to a field that has a significant proportion of foreigners. He noted that in his current team of nine engineers, only two were born in the US. "The rest of us are either on H1B visa, Green Card or naturalised citizens".

For others institutional diversity initiatives helped to ease their experience. RP03 remarked that a lot had changed since his undergraduate years in the 1970s. Acknowledging "the ultimate price paid by our African American brothers", he noted that diversity initiatives helped to change the overall atmosphere of the institution he had been with for more than 30 years. RP05 himself was at the centre of his institution's diversity initia-

tive. Among other colleagues, he not only fought to establish it, but also served as a leader for several years and helped to increase the proportion of minoritised populations among students, faculty and staff. However, RP11 recounted a different experience with diversity initiatives in her former institution:

As I was the only black person, who also happens to be female, I was called upon to be in every committee, because that is how they thought they would show diversity. After a while I woke up and I said to myself, 'this is not good for me, I'm not benefiting from this, I am not going to get my career anywhere with this much time for committee responsibilities'. Then I started to look for some other opportunities.

Two of the research participants who worked at Historically Black Institutions indicated that racism also persists in these types of institutions. One moved from a white-dominated institution, hoping that they would not face similar challenges. However, besides the language and cultural differences, the same sentiment that "we are here to take what is theirs" was evident.

While people have different mechanisms to cope with racism, two emerged as common among the research participants. The first is the level of immunity that comes from being from Ethiopia – a country with no history of colonial control and as such no experience of racism. The participants recounted that they were not aware of racism in the first few years after their arrival. Even today, they miss subtle cues and micro-aggression until it is too late or until someone else reacts to them. This could possibly make them inadvertent contributors to the problem. Most said that racism did not affect them as they ignored it. Others invoked their Ethiopian identity and pride to enable them to not personalise racist incidents, RP13 juxtaposed her experience as an Ethiopian with that of African American colleagues:

My experience [of growing up with Ethiopian values] certainly gave me that internal strength to overcome racism that I don't think I would have had had I been born here. I think it's much harder for African Americans who were born here than it is for Ethiopian Americans, because we've had the luxury of seeing a country run by you know, people of colour, whereas here that is hardly a common experience.

There was a consensus that, as RP01 put it, "as an immigrant you know that you start from [a] less privileged background, and to balance for that you must work maybe twice as hard". RP16 stressed:

You have to show results, and that takes a lot of work. You cannot be good at everything, and everything does not equally matter for your career. Therefore, you need to set your goals, identify what is important to get you there and stay focused on what is important. You might have



to work two or three times more than the others, but you can make it count if you are strategic.

Many of the research participants gave examples of how hard work and commitment produced results that were hard to ignore. However, a few also acknowledged that this had taken a toll on their personal life, leaving them less time to spend with their families and to work with Ethiopian universities.

In contrast, for some participants, the alienating environment in the US pushed them to seek emotional refuge in their connection with Ethiopia as ‘home’. This encouraged them to strengthen their ties with Ethiopian institutions where they not only do not have to justify themselves, but their work often produces better results and is more appreciated.

Institutional race relations thus emerged as one of the major factors that influence transnational engagement with the home country, either positively by encouraging more attachment, or negatively by work overload and taking up too much time and emotional capital. The possibility of a much higher return on the time and effort invested in Ethiopia encourages diaspora academics to strengthen their engagement and is hence a pull factor. Moreover, their experience of racism pushes them to search for more rewarding affiliations elsewhere.

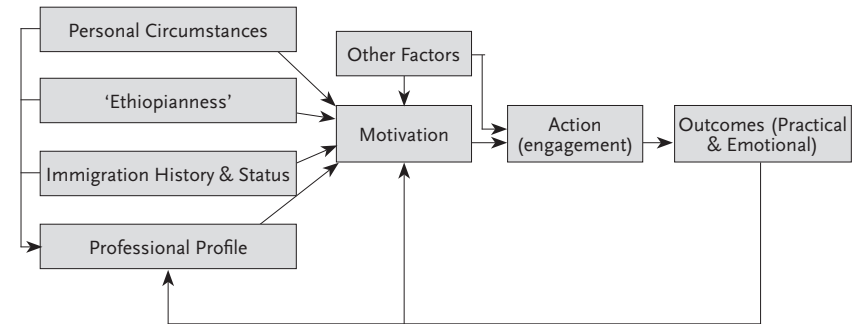
### Summary and Discussion

These reflections demonstrate that diaspora academics’ motivation to engage with Ethiopian universities is influenced by different personal factors. Besides professional reasons, which to some extent might be shared among those in a particular discipline, individual aspirations and drive determine their engagement. Values such as love of one’s country, linguistic and cultural connections with Ethiopia (or a particular part of the country), and the sense of obligation emanating from having studied in Ethiopia at the public expense, all contribute to the decision to engage. The emotional dividends accruing from their investment of time and effort in engagement, reinforce the desire to continue, and perhaps to strengthen engagement initiatives.

The article has also shown that ‘Ethiopian identity’ or ‘Ethiopianness’ which denotes a range of attributes such as race, colour, language, cultural values, etc., plays an important role in shaping the way Ethiopian diaspora academics interact and integrate with the environment in their home institutions in the US, as well as with Ethiopian institutions. On the other hand, the racial environment of US higher education not only influences the professional trajectories of diaspora academics, which in turn influences their engagement, but also determines the time and emotional resources they can spare to work with Ethiopian institutions. The family

situation and financial stability which are often more favourable in the later stages of one’s career, constitute the other major components of the personal environment.

Figure 1. The Formation of Motivation for Engagement



As shown in the figure, these different variables not only reinforce one another to shape what determines one’s experience, but also continuously evolve to adjust to changing circumstances to influence further action and experience. The outcomes of action are in turn inputs to determine motivation and resources. It is important to note that this illustration is not a complete presentation of everything that is relevant, nor do these factors necessarily produce engagement.

By highlighting the multiplicity and interdependence of factors within the personal space and immediate environment of the individual diaspora academic, this article has demonstrated the complex nature of transnational diaspora engagement in the field of higher education. It thus argues that a holistic view of transnational diaspora engagement calls for a closer examination of personal factors, as well as broader environmental circumstances.

This line of argument departs from, and contributes to the existing literature on the challenges that emanate from the free flow of skills across borders, particularly in respect of higher education. Commonly cited approaches in this regard, including ‘reverse brain drain’ (e.g., Chacko, 2007; Song, 1997; Tharenou and Seet, 2014; Wadhwa, 2009; Yoon, 1992) and ‘brain circulation’ (e.g., Robertson, 2006; Saxenian, 2002, 2005; Teferra, 2005; Zweig et al., 2008), are conceptually predicated on the notion of brain drain. While reverse brain drain is a self-explanatory concept that suggests returning emigrants to their home countries, as Saxenian (2005, p. 36) puts it, brain circulation also emphasises the need for “individuals

who left their home countries ...[to] return home ...while maintaining their social and professional ties to [their country of residence]”.

These two approaches not only presume brain drain as the starting point for the measures they suggest; they also largely emphasise what may be done from the perspective of institutional arrangements and policy incentives. Views that are predicated on brain drain are inadequate for at least three reasons. Firstly, having been educated in one’s home country (whether at one’s own cost or for free) and living in another country (by choice or due to coercion), as encapsulated in the notion of brain drain, is far too simplistic an explanation of the rationale for engagement with one’s home country. Contributing to one’s home country is not an automatic reaction to brain drain. Secondly, a slew of factors is at play that are both distinct to the individual (e.g., experiences of immigration, a sense of belonging, identity, nationalism, etc.) and to their immediate environment (e.g., family, work environment, etc.) as situated in the broader national and global contexts, and as pursued by the individual towards personal, familial or professional ends. By focusing on broader measures that could re-attract emigrants, the two approaches downplay the role of personal factors, effectively undermining the agency of the individual. Third, by focusing on brain drain, both reverse brain drain and brain circulation only consider first generation diaspora that emigrated from their home countries, excluding those born in their country of residence.

On the other hand, the broader emphasis on issues such as policies and institutions in relation to diaspora engagement overlooks the critical role of personal and micro-environmental factors. Policies and institutions are indeed major enablers, but not necessarily the ultimate driving force of engagement decisions. Personal circumstances, intrinsic values, experiences, and the practical and emotional outcomes of engagement have been shown to have significant impact. This is perhaps especially true in the field of higher education where engagement initiatives are often produced by and result in attributes of a personal nature. In other areas – such as investment – more straightforward decision-making tools and mechanisms, such as cost benefit analysis, are deployed.

### Conclusion

Institutional and policy perspectives are critically important but not sufficient to explain, analyse and identify ways to bolster diaspora engagement in the field of higher education. By embracing a broader view that takes account of personal, familial, professional, and environmental factors – along with their dynamic interplay – transnational diasporic engagement offers a comprehensive approach that captures the nuances and intricacies therein. Thus, acknowledging the diversity and the complexity of individual

attributes and preferences offers an improved frame of conceptualising the process of transnational diaspora engagement, and also creates a pathway for further inquiries into details, and reform agendas in institutional and policy settings.

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