

**Proceedings of the Fifth National Conference
on
Private Higher Education
Institutions (PHEIs) in Ethiopia**

***Major Theme: Private Higher Education in Ethiopia
at the turn of the Ethiopian
Millennium***

**Organized & Sponsored
By
St. Mary's University College
August 25, 2007
UN Conference Center
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia**

Student Engagement in Some Ethiopian Private Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The quality of higher education has been an overriding theme in the area of higher education since decades. Yet, controversies on how to ensure quality in higher education still dominate educational research and literature. Total quality management (TQM) has been borrowed from industries and widely applied in higher education. Recently, however, there is the contention that although TQM fits properly to the service provision of higher education, it is deficient to address the educational purpose of higher education. Consequently, new approaches have been forwarded and student engagement is argued to be one of the most appropriate approaches in explaining quality educational provision. It is also a very useful proxy for assessing 'added values' on students by higher learning institutions. The basic premise of student engagement is the assertion that high quality programs contribute to learning experiences that affect students' development positively. In view of this theoretical basis, this study assessed the status of student engagement in Ethiopian higher learning institutions using a questionnaire. Data were collected from students and findings that give evidence on the extent of academic challenge, the prevalence of active and collaborative learning and the quality of faculty-student interaction were unveiled. It is argued that external monitoring mechanisms for accreditation such as quality and quantity of buildings, availability of books, number and type of staff do not attend to significant issues that are imperative for ensuring quality higher education; hence, they need to be coupled with various approaches such as student engagement.

1. Introduction

Quality in Higher Education

Quality is so a pervasive issue in higher education that it recurs consistently in various higher education journals and conferences. Due to its ambiguous nature, the term quality has resulted in different conceptualizations and definitions which at times are competitive

and contradictory (Milliken and Colohan, 2004). Citing a number of scholars in the field, Milliken and Colohan (2004) identified some conceptualization of quality in higher education. Some consider it as “fitness for purpose”; others view it as “excellence in educational provisions”. Still others equate quality with “conformance to requirements” and “standards that should be met to achieve the specified purposes to the satisfaction of customers”. Routed on its fluidity and being ‘value-laden’, methods to ensure quality in higher education are divergent and controversial. Quality assurance, though complex and controversial, is an important issue in higher education due to different reasons. Monitoring and improvement of programs, benchmarking and market demands, accountability, funding, and policy development depend on information gathered through quality assurance (Coates, 2005). Borrowed from industries, total quality management (TQM) has been dominantly used in higher education since the 1980s (Sahney, Banwet, and Karungs, 2004). TQM is grounded on the principle of customer satisfaction. To this end, managers and employees must work on improving operations, management processes, and products (Berry, 1991). TQM mingles quality control, quality assurance, and quality improvement and addresses the needs of internal customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders (Peach, 1994 cited in Izadi, Kashef, and Stadt, 1996). When applied to education, TQM aims at satisfying students, parents, employers, and taxpayers by addressing their needs and involving them in the planning and execution of educational programs. Students should be allowed to communicate freely with staff and be involved in the planning of courses. In general, some believe that TQM has “applications for educators in virtually every aspect of their mission” (Izadi, Kashef, and Stadt, 1996:36).

Recently, however, there is the contention that TQM is unfit to the educational purpose of higher education — learning — and meets only the requirements of service provision (Holmes and McElwee, 1995; Bensimon, 1995; Harvey, 1995) although others consider this argument to have stemmed from academics’ desire to monopolize decision making in higher education (Lindsay, 1994 cited in Izadi, Kashef, and Stadt, 1996). The argument is TQM focuses on ‘the quality of the delivery by measuring, monitoring, and continuously

improving the processes which in education are not easily measurable and identifiable in advance (Srikanthan and Darlymple, 2005; Srikanthan and Darlymple, 2003). TQM, critics contend, has a place in educational service provisions such as libraries, enrolment, and cafeterias but is inappropriate in academic processes (Holmes and McElwee, 1995; Srikanthan and Darlymple, 2003). According to them, quality management in education has to emphasize the process of learning — interaction among teachers, students, and administrators — rather than looking at the process of delivery. Hence, they proposed a ‘holistic model’ of quality management in education whose service provision draws much from TQM and whose pedagogical efficacy rests much on the engagement, transformative, responsive university and the learning university models of quality management (Srikanthan and Darlymple, 2002). These models respectively emphasize learning experiences for students that have positive effects on their development, empowering students by emphasizing learning rather than teaching, addressing community needs and working collaboratively to meet community demands, and building organizational culture that fosters learning and inquiry. While each of these approaches suggests various methods for ensuring the quality of higher education, they converge with regard to the emphasis given for students learning and the collaborative approach needed to that end.

According to Srikanthan and Darlymple (2002), one basic difference between TQM and the holistic model which is referred as quality management education (QME) is the emphasis given to students. While TQM considers students as customers, QME assigns them “the key role of participants...and focuses on the empowerment of a course team across all the boundaries to facilitate dialogue centered learning” (Srikanthan and Darlymple, 2002:221). The QME centers on transformation of learners, by adding value and empowering them. To this end, higher education institutions need to build an organizational learning culture and collegialism by challenging recent trends of ‘managerialism’ and ‘cloisterism’ which are argued to be the consequences of TQM (Srikanthan and Darlymple, 2003).

It is not the intention of this paper to examine thoroughly the arguments that revolve on the two methods. Nor is it intended to argue that QME is a better model of quality assurance for higher education than TQM. Such debates in education have usually ended up in substituting one management fad by another with no noticeable influences on the practice of higher education. Yet, it must be made clear that quality assuring methods in higher education have long focused on indicators which have little to do with the learning of students. Adherents of student engagement point out a number of limitations to these methods (Coates, 2005; Kuh, 2002). With regard to institutional resources, it is believed that high quality physical, financial, and human resources in higher education institutions provide higher opportunities for students' learning. The assumption is the quality of the classrooms, laboratories, and teaching staff is related to the quality of the student learning experience (Coates, 2005). Kuh (2003:24-25), however, indicated that "students can be surrounded by impressive resources and not routinely encounter classes or take part in activities that engage them in authentic learning." Coates (2005) argue that though institutional resources may create opportunities for student learning, they are not casually related to student learning. Reputations, according to him, are also 'based on beliefs and stereotypes rather than evidence' which are mainly drawn from tradition, history and location, with no current evidence on the add on effect they have on students. What is very promising of student engagement is that it is based on pedagogical principles and educational research. As such, student engagement holds water under different propositions.

Student Engagement as Indicator of Quality Higher Education

Student engagement has recently become a common research agendum in higher education because it is significantly correlated with personal and social development. Also, it is used as an indicator of collegiate quality (Kuh, 2003; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Porter, 2006). Austin's (1985) argument that student involvement on the teaching learning process

is an indicator of quality higher education is the foundation for student engagement. Coates (2005) contended that quality assurance methods — focusing on teaching and other institutional factors — have marginalized student engagement from the indicators of quality higher education. According to Coates, student engagement is a direct indicator of educational processes and a proxy for measuring educational outcomes. Kuh (2003:24) noted that many studies in recent years show that students learn most when they invest their time and energy in educationally useful activities. Hence, “to assess the quality of undergraduate education at an institution, we need good information about student engagement: the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities” (Kuh, 2003:25). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005:602) assert that “If, as it appears, individual effort or engagement is the critical determinant of the impact of college, then it is important to focus on the ways in which an institution can shape its academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement.”

Defining high quality programs as those that provide students with learning experiences that have positive effect on students’ development, Haworth and Conrad (1997) as cited in Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) suggested that students, faculty, and administrators should invest in five areas which create conducive situation for student engagement. These are interactive teaching and learning, participatory cultures and organizational learning, involvement in various activities of the institution by faculty, students, and leaders, integrated program development and provision of adequate resources. Coates (2005) also stated that student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is a result of students’ participation in educationally purposeful activities. Institutions and staff should create opportunities and expectations for students to be involved in activities that lead to quality learning. Coates mentioned activities such as active learning, involvement in enriching learning experiences, seeking guidance from staff and collaborative learning with staff and students. Indicating that student engagement is necessary even when

institutions are reputable and well resourced, Coates contended that students participation in educationally useful activities may suffice for learning even when resources are scarce. Kuh (2006) indicated that student engagement represents the amount of time and effort students put into their studies, and into other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success and the ways the institution allocates and organizes its resources, learning opportunities, and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities.

Recent research on student engagement uses five benchmarks in assessing student engagement at various institutions: Academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, educational experiences, and supportive campus environments (Porter, 2006, Kuh and Gonyea, 2003; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, 2007, Coates, 2005b). Active and collaborative learning represents the contention that students learn more when they are actively involved in learning and work together with others (peers, staff, and community members) in solving problems or learning (Kuh, 2003). Such learning helps students not only to master learning material but also prepares them to deal with life problems which they encounter later on. Some of the indicators used to assess this benchmark are involvement in class discussions, working on projects, and class presentations. Student faculty interaction refers to the quality and frequency of non-classroom interactions with faculty. Working with instructors (in committee, projects) gives students opportunities to experience first hand problem-solving process and promotes lifelong learning. Some of the dimensions of student-faculty interaction are talking about career plans with a faculty member, discussing ideas from readings or classes with faculty members outside of class, working with faculty members on activities other than coursework, and getting prompt feedback on academic performance.

Enriching learning experiences refers to students' involvement, in and outside the institutions, in academic and non-academic matters that complement the institution's goal. Studies indicate that involving students in institution's jobs and committees increases their

leadership and problem-solving skills and develops sense of belongingness towards the institutions (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt, 2005). Visits to other colleges and universities, internships, using internet for learning, and interacting with organizations to broaden learning are some of the examples under this benchmark. With regard to academic challenge, there is the assumption that challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality (Kuh, 2007). Pace cited in Kuh (2007) also noted that students need to expend a certain 'quality of effort', to challenge themselves to learn, to interact with new ideas and practices and to practice the communication, organizational and reflective skills that should help them learn. Reading books, writing papers, and application of higher order thinking skills are some of the components of this benchmark. Supportive campus environment such as availability of books, offering guidance and counseling, and addressing students' daily life problems is also an integral part of student engagement.

The assertion that student engagement is one of the best indicators of quality higher education programs is also supported by empirical evidence. Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2005) reported that student engagement is correlated with critical thinking and grades although the relationship was not strong. Kuh et al. (2007) also indicated that student engagement has statistically significant positive effects on persistence and grades, the underprivileged students making a lot out of student engagement.

Research indicates that there is variation in student engagement among institutions and more within an institution (Kuh and Pasacrella, 2004). Porter (2006), for example, reported substantial effect of institutional structures on student engagement. The institutional structures that were found to have impact on student engagement were acre size in terms of the number of students in the campus, and programs and practices of institutions. Some also contend that selectivity based on students' achievement in pre-college examination affects student engagement (Kuh and Pasacrella, 2004). This contention is based on the assumption that student engagement is highly influenced by peers. Exposure to highly able

and competent peers has effect on how students spend their time and the extent they discuss educational issues. However, in a study conducted among students comprised of 272 baccalaureate offering colleges and universities, Kuh and Pascarella (2004) reported that there was at ‘best trivial relationships between selectivity and the various measures of student engagement’, demonstrating that student engagement and selectivity are fundamentally unconnected (Kuh and Pascarella, 2004: 56). In fact, selectivity was found to contribute to institutional level variance in 10 of the 20 items used to measure student engagement in colleges and universities of the USA by the National Survey on Student Engagement. Interestingly, however, its contributions on some of the components of student engagement – number of essay exams on courses and provision of feedback – were negative.

Another factor that is commonly believed to affect student engagement is institutional size (Porter, 2006; Kuh, 2003; Kuh and Pascarella, 2004). Smaller institutions engage their students in educationally useful activities more often than large institutions. This has to do with the distance between faculty and students. This seems to have some truth seen in Ethiopian situation. With the expansion of higher education, students and faculty frequently refer to the sparing interaction between students and faculty members. Kuh (2003), however, noted that there are large institutions which are as engaging as small institutions. Hence, what matters most is an institution’s program and practices that set good opportunities for student engagement. Literature also indicates that private institutions are more engaging than public institutions (Kuh and Pascarella, 2004). This is explained by the residential nature of private institutions and their small size. However, given that private institutions in Ethiopia may not satisfy both factors, this finding may not hold to be true in Ethiopian case.

The Problem

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which students in Ethiopian private higher learning institutions are engaged in educationally useful practices. There is solid evidence that student engagement in educationally useful practices is very much related to add values higher learning institutions have on students (Coates, 2005; Kuh, 2004). The Ministry of Education uses accreditation and other follow up mechanisms in order to keep the standard of private higher learning institutions. Though useful this procedure is, it does not address the extent to which students are engaged in learning. Hence, as private higher education institutions enroll many students, data on students' involvement on educationally useful practices is very much important to identify areas of improvement and is also a proxy indicator on the effect private higher institutions have on students.

Borrowing Kuh's and other writers work on the area, student engagement is conceptualized in this study to include the five components identified as benchmarks. Because some of the benchmarks entail a lot of activities which are either culturally unfit to Ethiopian situation or unaffordable by Ethiopian students, the benchmarks were at times tailored to include only comprehensive aspects. For example, under enriching experiences aspects such as visiting universities in other countries and working as an employee of a faculty member were excluded from the study. Under collaborative learning, items such as working with minority ethnic group, disabled students, and students from other universities were also excluded from the study.

By doing so, this study intends to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are students, in private higher learning institutions, engaged in effective educational practices?
2. To what extent are students involved in active and collaborative learning?
3. How often do students interact with faculty members on academic matters?
4. Do students get adequate support from faculty members?
5. Do students expend adequate effort for learning?

6. Are there differences in student engagement among students of various years of study?
7. Does the amount of time students spend in preparing for class vary across years of study?
8. Do senior students read more books and write papers than junior students?

Method of the study

The subjects of the study were undergraduate degree students at Admas University College, St.Mary's University College and Unity University College. The three higher learning institutions were selected as they have the largest number of students compared to other private colleges. Students in degree programs were selected purposively for some of the dimensions of student engagement such as paper presentation, project works, and also for participation in educational seminars and conferences entail educational practices that are features of baccalaureate or postgraduate studies. Students from various departments were randomly selected. Those students who were in their classes during the data collection were asked to fill in the questionnaires. Some students refused to do so but the majority of them were volunteers.

Instrument development and data collection

Researchers in higher education (Kuh, 2003; Coates, 2005; Terenzini and Pascarella, 1991) have developed questionnaires to measure student involvement in educationally useful practices and the corresponding effect these practices have on critical thinking, persistence and grades. Some of the items developed by these scholars were adapted to Ethiopian situation and used for the purpose of this study. Those items which appeared to be unfit to Ethiopian culture were not included in the questionnaire. For example, items such as 'discussed ideas with my instructor during coffee time or other informal sessions', 'visited a class in another country', 'took part in organizing and leading educational seminars' and

so on. Though the relevance of these items to assess student engagement is quite obvious, they were excluded from the questionnaire. Some items were developed by the researcher. In doing so, five items for active and collaborative learning, six items on academic challenge, five items on enriching educational experiences, five items on institutional support and five items on faculty-student interaction were developed. The questionnaire asked students to report how frequently they carried out the activities indicated in the items in the academic year of 2007 in a four point rating scale that ranges from “Very Often” (4) to “Never” (1). At times, students were asked to rate the number of books they have read, papers they have written as requirement for courses, and time spent for class preparation and quality of campus support.

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher and instructors. The instructors were informed about the purpose of the study and students were given the questionnaire in their classrooms. Some wanted to take the questionnaire to their home and brought it in the next class session. The questionnaire was prepared in Amharic to enable students clearly comprehend the items. A total of 350 questionnaire was distributed to the students and 303 questionnaire returned. However, 21 of the questionnaire were found to be either incompletely or wrongly filled in, thus excluded from the analysis. One item from faculty-student interaction and two items from institutional support were deleted from the final analysis as many students left blank spaces.

In the analysis of the study, 28 fourth year, 76 third year, 126 second year, and 52 first year students were included. 144 students reported that they work either on permanent or part-time basis and 138 students reported that they are full-time students.

Data Analysis

Percentages and One-Way ANOVA together with HSD were used to analyze the data. Percentages were used in order to show the frequency of student engagement on each item of the questionnaire. One-Way ANOVA was used to examine differences on student engagement (preparation time for classes, written papers, and books read by the students) among students of various year of study.

Results

Table 1 indicates that large number of students (58.2%) are occasionally involved in asking questions and classroom discussions. Over half of the students (51.1%) have hardly discussed ideas from readings with instructors and students. Class presentations are also alien to many students (57.1%) as they have never presented assignments or papers to their class. On the other hand, more than two third of the students (69.8%) reported that they worked frequently (28.7 % “very often” and 41.1% often) with classmates outside of class on class assignments and about two third of the students (63.8%) worked on projects “sometimes” or “often”.

Table 1: Frequency on Active and Collaborative Learning

	Items	Very often	Often	Some times	Never
1.	Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	31 (11.0)	61 (21.6)	164 (58.2)	26 (9.2)
2.	Made a class presentation based on assignments or readings	21 (7.4)	37 (13.1)	63 (22.3)	161 (57.1)
3.	Worked with other students on projects	22 (7.8)	123 (43.6)	57 (20.2)	80 (28.4)
4.	Discussed ideas from your readings with students and instructors	25 (8.9)	35 (12.4)	78 (27.7)	144 (51.1)
5.	Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	81 (28.7)	116 (41.1)	74 (26.2)	11 (3.9)

Note: The values in brackets refer to percentages.

Table 2 indicates that feedback provision is very sparse (47.9% of the students never received feedback) and discussion on academic matters is infrequent. In fact, many students (39.0%) reported that they do not discuss academic ideas with their instructors at all. Discussion on assignment appears to happen mainly occasionally and a little less than a quarter of the students (21.3%) reported they never discussed assignments with instructors. Student-faculty interaction on students' career plans is also uncommon as the large majority of the students said that they "sometimes" (29.1%) or "never" (62.8%) talked on the matter.

Table 2: Frequency of Faculty-Student Interaction

No	Items	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
1	Discussed assignments with an instructor outside class	35 (12.4)	38 (13.5)	149 (52.8)	60 (21.3)
2	Talked about career plans with a faculty member	8 (2.8)	15 (5.3)	82 (29.1)	177 (62.8)
3	Discussed academic matters from your readings or classes with instructors outside class	9 (3.2)	38 (13.5)	125 (44.3)	110 (39.0)
4	Received feedback from instructors on your academic performance (written or oral)	11 (3.9)	39 (13.8)	97 (34.4)	135 (47.9)

Table 3 shows that large number of students (73%) has never worked together on non-academic activities with faculty members. More than 70 percent of the students used libraries to enrich lecture notes although close to a quarter of the students (22.3%) never used libraries. Many students (63.9%) also reported that they used internet sources "often"

Table 3: Frequency on Enriching Learning Experiences

No	Items	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Never
1	Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)	7 (2.5)	15 (5.3)	53 (18.8)	207 (73.4)
2	Used libraries to enrich lecture notes and for further reading	19 (6.8)	79 (28.0)	121 (42.9)	63 (22.3)
3	Browsed internet to find articles or information related to your study	45 (16.0)	71 (25.1)	109 (38.7)	57 (20.2)
4	Went to organizations or communities to gather information related to your study	15 (5.3)	67 (23.8)	116 (41.1)	84 (29.8)
5	Attended seminars, conferences or presentations in the university or somewhere else	5 (1.8)	28 (9.9)	83 (29.4)	166 (58.9)

or “sometimes” to support their study. Taking part in seminars or conferences is unusual phenomenon as 58.9 % of the students never took part in such activities

Table 4 shows that many students are satisfied with the availability of books in their institution’s library and on the support they get from the institutions to succeed academically. On the availability of instructors for advising and other academic supports, nearly half of the students (47.2%) reported that it is fair.

Table 4: Frequency on Institutional Support

No	Items	Very Good	Good	Fair	Unsatisfactory
1	The extent to which the institution emphasized providing the support you needed to succeed academically	74 (26.2)	108 (38.3)	67 (23.8)	33 (11.7)
2	Availability of books in the institution’s library	94 (33.3)	108 (38.3)	57 (20.2)	23 (8.2)
3	Availability of instructors in their offices to provide you the necessary advising and other academic supports	36 (12.8)	71 (25.1)	133 (47.2)	42 (14.9)

It is believed that students’ effort on learning is related to the quality of learning. Table 5 shows that large number of students either do not read books (40.8 %), other than their lecture notes and modules, or read only 1 to 4 books in the academic year (39%). More than two-third of the students organize notes by reading textbooks “sometimes” (34.4 %) or do not do it at all (37.2 %). Nearly one third of the students (32.3 %) said they spend less than five hours in a week for class preparation and about the same number of students (31.9 %) said they spend nine to five hours, which is very well below the average time (thirteen to fourteen hours-per-week) for class preparation for first year undergraduate students (Kuh, 2007) and the hymn that college students have to spend at least two hours for every hour of classroom instruction. Interestingly – even spending very less time than the standard – about half of the students (51.4 %) think that they frequently (“very often” and “often”) work more than they expected to meet their instructors expectations. Paper work also appears to be uncommon as quarter of the students (25.5 %) has never done any paper work and about one third of the students (34.4 %) have done one or two papers in a year. More than three-fourth of the students (77.6%) reported that their instructors ask them to explain the application of theories “often” or “sometimes”.

Table 5: Frequency on Academic Challenge

No	Statements	Response options	Percentages
1	How often have you worked harder than you thought to meet an instructor’s standards or expectations?	Very often	64 (22.7)
		Often	81 (28.7)
		Sometimes	121 (42.9)
		Never	16 (5.7)
2	Number of hours you spent preparing for class in a week	> 15 hours	38 (13.5)
		10 to 14 hours	63 (22.3)
		5 to 9 hours	90 (31.9)
		<5 hours	91 (32.3)
3	Number of academic books you read in this academic year	5 to 9 books	57 (20.2)
		1 to 4 books	110 (39)
		Read only lecture notes and modules	79 (28.0)
4	Number of written papers or reports of	1 to 2 papers	115 (40.8)
		3 to 5 papers	38 (13.5)
		None	72 (25.5)

5	Organized notes from textbooks and reading assignments	Very often	34 (12.1)
		Often	46 (16.3)
		Sometimes	97 (34.4)
		Never	105 (37.2)
6	Asked by instructors to explain the application of theories or concepts	Very often	25 (8.9)
		Often	85 (30.1)
		Sometimes	134 (47.5)
		Never	38 (13.5)

The study also examined using one-way ANOVA whether there are differences in preparation time, reading books, and writing of papers among first, second, third, and fourth year students. In the questionnaire, the number of books read by the students, time employed for preparation for classes and numbers of papers written by students were indicated in ranges. For example, with regard to the amount of time spent by students for class preparation, students were asked to choose one of these choices: >15 hours, 10-14 hours, 5-9 hours, and <5 hours. These ranges were changed into values of 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively and the mean values for each group were calculated. The same was done for books read by the students (3, 2, and 1) and papers written (4, 3, 2, and 1) by the students.

Table 6 indicates that there are significant differences on books read by first, second, third, and fourth year students and papers written by them. There is no significant difference on the amount of time used for class preparation by students of various years of study. To identify the groups that significantly differ, Tukey's HSD test was employed.

Table 6: One-Way ANOVA on Time for Preparation, number of Papers they more, and Books Read by Students of Different Years of Study

		Sum of Squares	If	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Preparation Time	Between Groups	3.762	3	1.254	1.315	.270
	Within Groups	261.332	278	.954		
	Total	265.094	281			
Books Read by the Students	Between Groups	5.406	3	1.802	2.899*	.035
	Within Groups	170.306	278	.622		
	Total	175.712	281			
Written Papers	Between Groups	10.795	3	3.598	3.994*	.008
	Within Groups	246.877	278	.901		
	Total	257.673	281			

*p<0.05

Table 7 indicates that there are significant differences on the books read by second year and third year students and between third year and fourth year students. Third year students have the highest mean value, and interestingly fourth year students have the lowest mean value, indicating that they read fewer books than other groups.

Table 7: Pairwise Comparison of Means on Books Read by Students of Various Years of Study

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
	1.8369	1.7381	2.0395	1.6250
Year 1	—	.08883	-.21255	.20192
Year 2		—	-.30138*	.11310
Year 3			—	.41447*

*p<0.05

Table 8 shows that third year students wrote more papers than first and second year students and fourth year students wrote more papers than first year students.

Table 8: Pairwise Comparison of Means on Papers Written by Students of Various Years of Study

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
	2.4615	2.6349	2.9474	3.0417
Year 1		-.17338	-.48583*	-.58013*
Year 2			-.31245*	-.40675*
Year 3				-.09430

*p<0.05

Discussion

The findings of this study showed some promising and many unsatisfactory practices by students and institutions. The promising findings of this study are that many students work frequently with their peers outside class on assignments, ask questions or take part in discussions occasionally (see Table I), browse internet, go to libraries and organizations in their community to enrich their knowledge intermittently (see Table III), and are satisfied with the support they get from their institutions (see Table IV). Many students also reported that their instructors ask them to explain the application of theories and concepts (see Table V). On the other hand, there were findings that require the attention of faculty and institutional leaders. Of the five aspects of student engagement, faculty-student interaction and academic challenge were found to be very poor. Many of the students discuss with their instructors on academic matters and assignments outside class very infrequently and many students also reported that they do get feedback less frequently or not at all (see Table II). In fact, 62.8 % reported that they have never talked with their instructors on career plans, 39.0% reported that they have never discussed on academic

matters outside class, and 47.9 % reported that they have never received feedback from instructors on their academic performance (see Table II). Supporting the mediocrity of student-faculty interaction, nearly half of the students (47.2 %) rated the availability of their instructors for offering support as “fair”.

The findings on academic challenge were also worth considering. The amount of time students spend for class preparation is well below the standard and the number of books they read are few. For example, about two third of the students (see Table V) spend not more than nine hours for class preparation in a week and of these students nearly one third of them (32.3%) spend less than five hours. Moreover, 40.8% of the students reported that they read only lecture notes and modules in the academic year and 39 % of the students indicated that they have read 1 to 4 books in the academic year. In addition, nearly one fourth of the students (22.3 %) never used a library. The reason for reading few number of books by the students may be the availability of modules for many courses. Organizing notes and writing papers are also infrequent practices. Related to this, 57.2 % of the students have never presented papers or assignments in their class (see Table I). Interestingly, however, large number of students thinks that they work more than they expected to cope with their teachers’ expectations, illustrating that students underestimate the challenges of college education.

The findings of the study also indicated that there is no variation in the amount of time spent for class preparation among beginning, junior, and senior students. Amazingly, fourth year students read fewer books than first year, second year, and third year students although the only significant differences were between third and second year and third and fourth year students (see Table VII). Third year students read more books than other groups of students. Writing of papers follows its logical order: fourth year students writing the highest number of papers and first year students writing the lowest number. Both third and fourth year students have written higher number of papers than first year and second year students (see Table VIII).

Conclusion

Although the samples of the study may not represent all private higher learning institutions in Ethiopia (which is one limitation of the study), the results of the study indicate that private higher education institutions have to work a lot to create conducive situations for student engagement. Many students are not engaged in educational practices which have strong linkages with the quality of student learning. The first intervention should be to identify students who are less engaged in educational practices and design appropriate support strategies for them. Secondly, the results of this study make pretty clear that faculty-student interaction is so sparse that learning from instructors is very much limited on what happens only inside the classroom. Institutions can introduce practices and mechanisms which will avail instructors for students. Thirdly, students are less challenged academically that although the time they spend for preparation and the number of books they read are less than the standard, they think that they work more than they expected. Institutions must introduce various activities that will engage students in reading books and expending effort for learning. When designing courses, instructors may have to make clear that students have to read books, organize notes, and support their classroom lessons by reading books. One way of encouraging students to read books and expend more effort for learning is aligning assessment mechanisms with educationally useful practices — the positive wash back effect of testing on teaching. Students' involvement on extracurricular activities is also very poor. This requires also the attention of institutional leaders.

This study has some limitations which readers may have to put into perspectives. The study is a small scale survey which poses a challenge on the generalizability of the findings. The study also does not identify factors that are related to student engagement which would have made intervention simpler. Validating the data through interviews and participant observation could have also helped to explain some of the results that need further interpretation.

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