



**The Role of Research in Promoting the Quality of Education in PHEIs**

**by  
Berhanu Matthews (PhD)**

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## ***The Role of Research in Promoting the Quality of Education in PHEIs***

Berhanu Matthews (PhD)

ILS, Addis Ababa University, P.O.Box: 32016, Addis Ababa

### **Abstract**

The primary aims or missions of higher education institutions whether they are public or private, are teaching and conducting research. In the context of higher education these aims are inseparable. These aims are often stated in university and college catalogues and departmental programme brochures. However, the mission of conducting research is too often set aside, as faculty become preoccupied with teaching and administrative matters, and remain merely as a statement in the catalogue and never takes off the ground. This can be regarded as a serious problem that can severely affect the quality of education in institutions of higher learning. This is because one of the indicators of the quality of education in higher education institutions is a thriving research culture.

The main objective of this paper was to look into the state of research in private higher education institutions (PHEIs) with particular focus on those found in Addis Ababa. The paper is by and large descriptive and analytic. Data were collected from four PHEIs through interviews and surveys. Documents like the Higher Education Proclamation were examined. Moreover, a check list of the manifestations of a thriving research culture (Sunderland 1998) was used to assess the current state of research culture in PHEIs. Preliminary findings indicate that the output of research in PHEIs at present is quite scanty.

### ***1. Introduction***

The world has entered the phase of mass higher education, which follows closely upon the emergence of mass elementary and mass secondary education. In the words of Mackenzie et al (1986: 11), all these three phases of education are expressions of one phenomenon: "a hunger for knowledge and skills." Ethiopia is not an exception in this regard. The remarkable increase and development in higher education in general and private higher education in particular in Ethiopia over the last seven or eight years is also a result of this mass hunger for knowledge and skills. Commenting on this Wondwosen (2003: 1) observes:

In the last five years, the Ethiopian higher education system has witnessed a remarkable change unprecedented in its history in the form of the unanticipated emergence and expansion of private higher education institutions (PHEIs).

In this wave of expansion, it becomes imperative to consider the primary aims and missions of higher education institutions whether they are public or private. According to Higher Education Proclamation No. 351/2003 pp 1 and 4, "higher education means education offered to students who attend diploma, first degree, second degree or medical specialty and doctoral degree programmes."

The three concepts at the heart of this topic are higher education, research, and quality of education. The term research can be defined in various ways. For Molly (1983: 5) "Research is a process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and investigation of data." For Clifford (1980: 4) "Research is a systematic way of asking questions, a systematic method of enquiry." For Ary et al (1985: 21): Research may be defined as "the application of the scientific approach to the study of a problem." According to Jones (1985: 3), "Research is a structured inquiry which utilizes acceptable methodology to solve a problem and create new generally applicable knowledge." The 15<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher, Francis Bacon offered probably the most telling observation about the process of research. He states: "Research is a power of suspending judgment with patience, of meditating with pleasure, of asserting with caution, of correcting with readiness, and of arranging thought with scrupulous pain" (in Sukia *et al* 1983: 1).

By way of a brief review of literature, it would be appropriate to look into the role of research in the human quest for knowledge and skills and in the effort of finding answers to questions.

In a general sense, the history of research is as old as humanity itself. This is because research is a way of finding answers to questions and throughout history human beings have sought answers to their questions. In the quest for finding answers to their questions human beings have used six main sources of knowledge. These are experience, authority, custom and tradition, deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning and the scientific approach.

Experience is a corpus of personal knowledge that is immediately at hand as a means of solving problems. For those things that are difficult or impossible to know by personal experience, we usually turn to authority. In the absence of authority, we also resort to custom and tradition as a source of knowledge. How was it done in the past? Perhaps the first significant and systematic approach to finding answers to questions was deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning was introduced by Aristotle and his followers. Another source of knowledge that has been used as a means of finding answers to questions is inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning was developed by the 16<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher called Francis Bacon. In this approach general conclusions are established on the basis of facts gathered through direct observation. Yet another source of knowledge used for finding answers to questions is the scientific method. This method was first applied by Charles Darwin in his theory of evolution. In this method the most important aspects of the inductive and deductive methods are integrated in order to find solutions to problems. This is clearly projected through the following observation of Darwin:

My first notebook on evolution was opened in July 1837. I worked on true Baconian principles, and without any theory collected facts on a wholesale scale, more especially with respect to domesticated productions, by printed enquire, by conversation with skilful breeders and gardeners, and by extensive reading. When I see the list of books of all kinds which I read and abstracted, including whole series of journals and transactions, I am surprised at my industry. I soon perceived that selection was the keystone of man's success in making useful races or animals and plants. But how selection would be applied to organisms living in a state of nature remained for some time a mystery to me.

In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after I had begun my systematic enquiry, I happened to read for amusement "Malthus on Population", and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species. Here then I had at last got a theory by which to work (1899: 68).

If we consider higher education as a means of finding solutions to societal problems, this age-old tradition of quest for finding answers to questions should be given important place in the function of HEIs. PHEIs should thus be places where new knowledge is seriously pursued and existing knowledge is conscientiously transmitted. This is to say that although teaching and learning are central functions of any college or university, these functions cannot be meaningfully realized without developing a thriving research culture.

According to various documents obtained from PHEIs and Higher Education Proclamation, the primary aims or missions of higher education institutions are teaching and conducting research. These aims are often boldly stated in college and university catalogues and vision and mission documents of institutions of higher learning. However, the mission of conducting research is too often marginalized in practice as faculty become preoccupied with teaching and administrative matters. Since the missions of teaching and research are inseparable in the context of higher education, such marginalization of research can be regarded as a serious problem that can severely affect the quality of education in institutions of higher learning. This is because one of the indicators of the quality of education in higher education institutions is a thriving research culture. The main objective of this paper is to look into the state of research in private higher education institutions (PHEIs) with particular focus on those in Addis Ababa.

## **2. Research Methodology**

Two basic methods have been used in writing this paper. These are analysis and descriptive survey. Theoretical literature on the concept of research has been examined. Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamation and the founding documents of PHEIs have been investigated. Moreover, a 15-item questionnaire survey has been conducted with 120 academic staff in PHEIs in Addis Ababa to obtain information on the state of research in these institutions. The questionnaire has been designed on the basis of Sunderland (1998:5) categories for assessing the research culture in institutions of higher learning. Some of the categories have been developed from the Higher Education Proclamation No. 351/2003. The questionnaire was conducted in 7 selected PHEIs in Addis Ababa. Addis Ababa was selected as a context of this research for two basic reasons. First, most PHEIs are in Addis Ababa. Secondly, the greatest concentration of academic staff of PHEIs is also in Addis Ababa.

The question that arises at this point is: what is the state of the primary aim of research at PHEIs? This is the central question of this paper. The subsequent section will attempt to answer this question.

### ***Procedure***

A 15-item questionnaire was distributed to 7 private higher education institutions to elicit information on the research culture in the institutions. The institutions are St. Mary's College, Unity University College, Africa Beza College, Admas College, Zegha Business College, Royal College, and Atlanta College. A total of 120 academic staff, over 25% from each PHEI, were expected to fill in the questionnaire. However, only academic staff in the PHEIs duly filled in the questionnaire. In spite of the unstinted efforts of the researcher, it was absolutely impossible to get back the questionnaire distributed to Atlanta, Royal, and Admas Colleges.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1 Results**

The following are the findings of the questionnaire survey on the state of research in PHEIs covered by this study.

**Table 1: Reaction of PHEIs about the Importance of Research in Promoting Quality of Education**

<i>Level of Importance</i>	<i>How would you rate the importance of research in promoting the quality of education at your college/university?</i>							
	<i>St. Mary's College</i>		<i>Unity University College</i>		<i>Africa Beza College</i>		<i>Zegha Business College</i>	
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Extremely Important</i>	20	62.5	27	60	2	40	3	75
<i>Very Important</i>	8	25.0	12	26.7	2	40	1	25
<i>Important</i>	2	6.25	6	13.3	1	20	0	0
<i>Somewhat Important</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Not Important</i>	2	6.25	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Total</i>	32	100	45	100	5	100	4	100

**Remarks:** *f* stands for frequency and % indicates percentage values

**Table 2: The State of Research in PHEIs**

Ser. No	Items	Name of Private Colleges															
		St. Mary's College				Unity University College				Africa Beza College				Zegha Business College			
		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1	Are there departmental research seminars at your college?	12	40	18	60	14	31	31	68.9	1	20	4	80	1	25	3	75
2	Are there college or faculty level research seminars at your college?	18	60	12	40	21	46.6	11	13.3	1	20	5	40			4	100
3	Are there publications at your college?	30	100			32	71			2	40	3	60	2	50	1	25
4	As a staff member do you get research grants from your college or other sources?	19	63.3	11	36.7	13	28.9	22	26.7			5	100			4	100
5	Do you think the academic staff at your college are actively engaged in research?	10	33.3	20	66.6	11	24.4	25	55.6			5	100	1	25	2	50
6	Are there famous actual researchers at your college/ university?	21	70	12	40	18	40	15	33.3			3	60	2	50		
7	Are there famous potential researchers at your college?	30	100			37	82.2			2	40			3	75	1	25
8	Are there research groups in your department?	20	66.6	10	33.3	20	44.5	25	55.6			5	100			4	100

### **3.2 Discussion**

In this section the state of research in the selected PHEIs will be discussed in the light of the questions and categories adopted for assessing the research culture in institutions of higher learning.

As can be seen from the findings of the survey, out of 84 respondents 52 (65.4%) rated the role of research in promoting the quality of education in higher learning as extremely important. Similarly, 23 respondents (27.3%) rated the role of research as very important. In other words, 92.3% of the academic staff in the institutions where the survey was conducted considered research as highly valuable for promoting the quality of education at PHEIs. The findings also show that talks or public lectures happen sometimes or rarely. Out of 84 respondents 34 (41%) said that talks or public lectures happened only sometimes and 22 respondents said that such academic events happen rarely. The survey also revealed that 56 (70.3%) of the respondents said that there are no departmental seminars at their institutions of higher learning. In the survey 32 (38%), of the respondents indicated that there are no college or faculty level seminars at their colleges. This study also showed that 66 (79.8%) of the respondents said that there are publications at their institutions of higher education.

On the other hand, in relation to publication, 52 (61.9%) of the respondents indicated that the publications are by and large teaching materials or handouts. In the survey 42 (50%) of the respondents said that there is no research grant scheme at their colleges. However, 32 (38%), of the respondents indicated that there is a research grant scheme at their institutions of higher learning. In the survey, 52 (64.2%) of the respondents revealed that the academic staff at their institutions of higher education are not actively engaged in research. The main reasons given in the study for this situation are too much teaching load, lack of incentives for researchers, lack of research grants, lack of research experience, lack of interest, and lack of time due to additional part-time jobs. However, the survey showed that 72 (75.7%) of the respondents believe that there are potential researchers at their colleges. The findings of the survey also indicated that 44 (44.5%) of the respondents said that there are no research groups in their departments. The situation seems to be diverse as 40 (40%) of the respondents indicated that there are research groups in their departments. Concerning the amount of time they devote to research, 72 (75.5%) of the respondents indicated that they devote either none of their time or only 10% of their time to research.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

##### **4.1 Conclusions**

The primary aim of this paper has been to investigate the state of research in private higher education institutions. The findings of the study revealed that although the academic staff in private institutions of higher education have a firm conviction about the role of research in promoting the quality of education in their institutions, the state of research is very unsatisfactory. Most of the manifestations of a thriving research culture that should characterize institutions of higher learning such as talks or public lectures, research grants, research seminars, research groups and publications of journals are not in place in many of the PHEIs, with the exception of St. Mary's College and Unity University College. Moreover, although the findings show that there are a good number of potential researchers in private higher education institutions, these academic staff are not actively engaged in research. Likewise, although the Higher Education Proclamation stipulates that academic staff in institutions of higher education should devote 25% of their time to research (see definition number 7 of the Proclamation), the study revealed that in the current state of affairs, academic staff in PHEIs devote either none of their time or only 10% of their time to research.

##### **4.2 Recommendations**

In order to alleviate this problem and to inculcate a thriving research culture in PHEIs, the following recommendations can be made. First and foremost, the institutions should create conducive atmosphere for public lectures, regular departmental and faculty or college level research seminars. Secondly, in order to engage actual and potential researchers in research, the PHEIs should develop research grant schemes and incentives, and should encourage publications in reputable journals. Thirdly, the teaching load of academic staff should be carefully considered in order to engage them in research. On the whole, in order to make higher education a problem solving activity and to create a vibrant teaching-learning situation in PHEIs, the two aims of higher education, namely teaching and research should go hand in hand.



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