

University World News

'Abiy's Fellows' – A new frontier to advance excellence

[Damtew Teferra](#) 22 June 2018 [Issue No: 222](#)

In addition to its material benefits, it is hoped that the new prime minister's scholarship scheme will enhance the currency of merit and excellence in all walks of life and provide inspiration for higher education students looking for worthy role models.

The new Ethiopian Prime Minister, Dr Abiy Ahmed, recently announced an exclusive scholarship for holders of Gold Medals – typically known as degrees earned *summa cum laude*. This initiative, currently in its early stages of development, aims to cultivate the next generation of intelligentsia to advance Ethiopia.

It is conceivable that the prime minister's experience and academic credentials – a Master of Arts in Transformational Leadership and Change – explain his unique approach to promoting excellence.

Ethiopia's higher education sector has witnessed phenomenal growth in the past decade. The country's more than 40 public and 130 private institutions currently enrol nearly 800,000 students and produce over 100,000 graduates a year. Its enrolment rate of 10% is one of the highest in Africa.

With an estimated population of 102 million, more than 40% of whom are under the age of 15, Ethiopia faces the possibility of both a fantastic demographic dividend and calamitous social upheaval.

The quality of higher education in Ethiopia has been the subject of intense debate since the 'massification' drive began in the mid-1990s, with critics and government officials agreeing on the need for more effort to address this challenge.

Like other African countries, Ethiopia confronts the challenge of expanding access while promoting quality. In his short tenure – he assumed office in April – the prime minister has repeatedly spoken of the urgent need to ensure the latter.

Precedents

The planned Gold Medallist Scholarship appears to mirror the Rhodes Scholarship which is recognised globally for grooming and nurturing prominent world leaders such as Bill Clinton (former president of the United States), John Turner (former prime minister of Canada) and Malcolm Turnbull (prime minister of Australia). The list from Africa includes Arthur Mutambara of Zimbabwe, Edwin Cameron of South Africa and Kingwa Kamencu of Kenya, to name but a few.

Countries around the world including India, China and South Korea have sent hundreds of thousands of students to study abroad on 'generic' scholarship schemes. Ethiopia, for its part, has been sending hundreds, if not thousands, of scholarship holders to countries such as India, South Africa and now China.

One such scheme is the Betre Science Ethiopia Scholarship Program that is open to all qualified Ethiopians to enhance human resource development with a focus on science and technology.

In establishing the Gold Medallist scheme, the Ethiopian prime minister is rightly betting on building the next generation of 'enlightened' political leaders, economic elites and social entrepreneurs to transform society. This exclusive club may mark the first such initiative in Africa.

Ethiopian experiment

The government is expected to fully fund the scholarship, indicating Ahmed's serious commitment to excellence and quality. While the prime minister jokingly admits that he is not in the Gold Medallist club, he envisages that it will have a profound impact on the future of his country.

This Ethiopian experiment may be instructive to others in Africa as part of their renewal strategy. Development players and partners, multinationals, wealthy individuals and the diaspora may need to be drawn in to support and expand this model of social transformation by nurturing the next generation of Africans that exhibit excellence.

While Ethiopia's efforts to build excellence by tapping the crème de la crème of its graduates is impressive, robust and transparent policies, guidelines and procedures need to be put in place to ensure its success. Extensive experience, lessons and knowledge exist from similar schemes around the world.

The significance of this ambitious plan is apparent in a number of tangible and symbolic ways, as outlined above. In symbolic terms, it may rekindle the virtue and importance of merit and excellence in all walks of life and enhance its currency. Furthermore, it will excite the youth, particularly higher education students looking to role models for inspiration.

Reminiscing the past; anticipating the future

While the scholarship is a step in the right direction, the lack of a single ministry to facilitate strategic alignment between higher education and science and technology and build greater synergy continues to concern me.

Currently, public universities in Ethiopia fall under the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science and Technology. The Ministry of Science and Technology was established in 2008 to advance science and technology in the country. It replaced the Commission for Higher Education that was founded in 1975 with a similar mandate.

Two universities that focus on science and technology fall under the Ministry of Science

of Technology, representing a strategic decision to deploy them as a vehicle to achieve its ambitious development plan.

I have, for more than a decade, argued the case for the establishment of one ministry responsible for both higher education and science and technology in Ethiopia. Bringing higher education institutions (and other entities) under one roof would enable the strategic alignment of inherent synergies.

At an event at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in 2007 entitled "Conference on Higher Education in Ethiopia: Future challenges", I had the opportunity to speak on the topic of building research capacity in Ethiopian universities. I asked whether it was time for Ethiopia to establish a new organ in the form of a Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology:

"I am raising this issue for a third time in such a gathering in Ethiopia prompted by the pattern around the world where countries are positioning themselves to capitalise from the knowledge society. Producing high-level expertise to create, access, adapt, consume and disseminate knowledge has become critical for national development and integrating science, technology and higher education as a national knowledge development strategy for meaningful social and economic progress is gaining more traction.

"Institutions, departments and expertise are reorganised, reshuffled and streamlined to capitalise on their collective strength, quality and vigour. The repositioning and reconstitution of ministries and organisations represent steps in the realisation and enhancement of these underlying objectives. Nearly a third of the African continent, many countries in Latin America and others in Asia have integrated their higher education and science and technology under one roof."

The phenomenal growth of all of Ethiopia's education sub-sectors and the country's determination to deploy its higher education system as a vehicle for development make it even more imperative to seriously consider this proposal.

Enabling 'Abiy's Fellows'

The youngest leader in Africa, Ahmed has received countless academic and political accolades and is one of the few heads of state with an earned doctorate. It is clear that he is making strides on a number of fronts as he steers the country out of its political crisis while setting its future strategic direction.

It is anticipated that the Gold Medallist Scholarship will yield significant social, economic, cultural – and political – benefits. Looking ahead, it is essential that 'Abiy's Fellows' not only receive excellent education but commensurate work opportunities when they graduate to reap the anticipated dividend from this national investment and progressive outlook.

By creating greater synergy through establishing a Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, we are more likely to be able to provide the best possible

opportunities for these fellows.

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