Student Ethnic Diversity Management in Ethiopian Universities: Practices, Challenges, and Way Forward

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Accepted: 21 November 2022 / Published online: 29 November 2022
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Abstract

Ethnic-related issues have been the historic and prevalent questions of Ethiopian society. Student ethnic diversity management is one of the major challenges facing public universities in Ethiopia. I interviewed 48 deans to examine the practice, challenges, and way forward of student ethnic diversity management. The study revealed that the practice of student ethnic diversity management is low and there are different internal and external factors that affect diversity management in higher education. Above all, the politicization of ethnicity is found to be the mother of all challenges associated with student ethnic diversity management in Ethiopia. This implies that addressing issues related to the ethnic political and administrative system at a national level is the highest priority, but is a long-term plan, and universities need to take different measures that help them to at least avoid or minimize the negative impacts of diversity.

Keywords Diversity · Diversity management · Ethiopia · Higher education, University

Introduction

Diversity can be broadly conceived of as all the ways that people are different (Pant and Vijava, 2015; Adamu, 2014). The difference could be based on various attributes including, among other things, ethnicity, religion, race, language, culture, ability, social status, and sexual orientation. In the higher education context, diversity may be mostly considered as all those differences among students, staff, and faculty members. This study focused on student ethnic diversity in Ethiopian public universities.

Diversity is important at different levels of personal development, but it is thought to be significantly important during the university years because many students come to university in late adolescence and early adulthood, which is a critical stage of development in which individuals define themselves in relation to others and exercise various social roles before making permanent commitments to different issues including professions, close relationships, and social and political groups (Gurin et al., 2002). Diversity
considerably enhances students’ development in the cognitive, affective, and interpersonal domains (Milem, 2003). Some of the individual benefits of diversity include greater openness to diversity (Pascarella et al., 1996), increased cultural knowledge and understanding of diversity (Antonio, 2001), increased intellectual engagement and personal development (Umbach & Kuh, 2006), developed complex and critical thinking (Gurin et al., 2002), developed perspective-taking skills (Gottfredson et al., 2008), reduced levels of stereotyping and ethnocentrism (Milem, 2003), understanding self and other (Pascarella et al., 1996), growth in intellectual self-concept (Gurin et al., 2002) and academic skills (Milem, 2003), and better prepared for living and working in a diverse society (Gurin et al., 2002).

A diverse student body can be valuable because it potentially leads to a wider range of thoughts, ideas, and opinions (Adamu, 2014), increases the likelihood of socializing with diverse groups and discussing various diversity-related issues (Gurin et al., 2002), and creates an enriched academic environment (Shaw, 2005). This, in turn, contributes to developing mutual understanding and positive intergroup relations by challenging students to refine their way of thinking and reducing prejudices toward outgroup members (Pettigrew, 1998).

It is necessary to note that although the mere presence of students from diverse backgrounds is an opportunity for meaningful interactions among diverse peers (Roksa et al., 2017), it does not guarantee to benefit from diversity as the outcome of an increased diverse student body is not necessarily positive. Study indicates that diversity-related challenges lead to less cohesiveness, less effective communication, increased anxiety, and greater discomfort, tension, and conflict among diverse groups (Cox, 2001). When diversity is not properly addressed or is totally ignored, it can have negative effects, such as “increased egocentrism, and negative relationships characterized by hostility, rejection, divisiveness, scapegoating, bullying, stereotyping, prejudice, and racism” (Johnson & Johnson, 2000, p. 15). This shows that a diverse student body is a necessary but not sufficient condition to benefit from diversity (Hurtado, 2007; Milem, 2003; Umbach & Kuh, 2006). This implies that the way diversity is addressed in different contexts determines its impact (Milem et al., 2005). Therefore, managing diversity becomes one of the crucial tasks of universities.

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of diversity management (Foster & Harris, 2005), and yet generally managing diversity can be defined as “the process of creating and maintaining a positive environment where the differences of all personnel are recognized, understood and valued, so that all can achieve their full potential” (Lumadi, 2008, p.8). In this study, managing diversity is likewise conceived of as a continuing process that intends to create and foster a positive learning and living environment on campus that benefits all individuals and groups regardless of their ethnic differences.

Ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversities are considered to be significant distinguishing features of Ethiopian society (Adamu, 2014), and diversity-related issues are rooted in the social and political history of the country. In Ethiopia, there are more than 80 languages and Amharic is the working language of the federal government. There are also different religions including Christianity (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant), Islam, Judaism, and traditional religions.

In Ethiopia, the first higher education was established in 1950 during the Haile Selassie regime. As any government does, the Haile Selassie regime promised to bring development to the country. However, the regime’s failure to address several social and political problems and the denial of equality created widespread dissatisfaction. And yet, it was difficult to challenge the political and administrative system as there was a lack of political consciousness among Ethiopians, most of whom were illiterate and working for landlords under a feudal system. There were also no civil society organizations
or political parties to stand up for the rights of the larger society and voice its grievances (Adamu & Basvik, 2018). It was in such contexts that university students emerged as “the most outspoken and visibly the only consolidated opposition group” (Balsvik, 1985, p. xiii) to challenge the system. The students considered themselves the “spokesmen and advocates of the ‘suffering masses’” (Balsvik, 2009, p. 263). Ethnicity also became a political issue when some students of the then Haile Selassie I University raised questions of nationalities in the late 1960s. Although this issue was less emphasized during the military regime (1974–1991), it became a major topic of discussion in the early 1990s when the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power and introduced an ethnic-based federal and political system.

Since the introduction of the ethnic-based federal and political system, it is becoming more and more evident that many people’s first allegiance is to their ethnic group, and “their country is a poor second” (Milkias, 2011, p. 58). EPRDF also amplified historical grievances and the discourse of oppressor and of oppressed as part of the divide and rule strategy, and this has created hatred and animosity among the society and students from different ethnic backgrounds. This strategy instilled distrust and eroded the intergroup relationship between different ethnic groups. Current university students were born after the EPRDF came to power, and they learned both prejudice and stereotypes associated with different ethnic groups. In a nutshell, it can be argued that the government’s ethnic-based administration and political system has influenced intergroup relations among the society and students from different ethnic backgrounds (Adamu, 2015) by creating a fertile ground for the formation of social stereotypes and prejudice (Bigler & Liben, 2007).

Both the ruling and opposition political parties consider higher education institutions as fertile grounds for executing their political agenda because of (1) university students’ historical contribution to political changes in Ethiopia (Adamu & Balsvik, 2018) and (2) the diverse student body they have from every corner of the country which is considered as a microcosm of the Ethiopian society. Although there were minor ethnic tensions and conflicts among students at least over the past three decades, this has increased since the 2005 general election, where opposition parties rejected the provisional results of the election and university students mounted public protests over the election resonating opposition parties’ complaints (Adamu, 2014). Public universities (e.g., Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Dire Dawa, Ambo, Adigrat, Hawassa, Woldia, and Haramaya universities) were the scene of recurring ethnic conflicts. The magnitude of ethnic tension and conflict in public universities has particularly soared (both in frequency and impact) in the past few years, and more so since 2018 (Ashine, 2019). During 2018–2019, campuses were temporarily closed, many students left universities, and some students were killed (Adamu, 2019). In early 2020, universities were so shaken by a series of escalated ethnic conflicts and the government hinted at the possible remedy of closing universities to take time to address the issue (Woldegiyorgis & Adamu, 2022). As a blessing in disguise, COVID-19 forced the closure of universities, and this was a big relief for the government and society.

Although public universities are answerable to the federal government, they have been behaving and acting like local universities serving the society of the region they are located. Instead of addressing this fundamental problem, which is against the wisdom of a university, the government promoted ethnic-based regionalization of universities through ethnic-based senior leadership appointments and university board membership of regional authorities. This coupled with the national-level politicization of ethnicity has impeded positive intergroup relations and intensified tensions and conflicts among ethnically diverse students.
In relation to this, universities have a special role to play in ensuring that a diverse student body is considered as an opportunity rather than a problem. In order to achieve this, universities need to plan and design different approaches, and thus, managing diversity becomes one of their important duties (Liu, 1998). However, ethnic diversity in higher education is considered as the most pronounced aspect of diversity that needs urgent diversity management interventions because of the ever-increasing ethnic tensions and conflicts in public universities (Adamu, 2019; Amnesty International, 2020; Ashine, 2019) which resulted in physical injury and death of students, damage to university and personal properties, interruption of teaching–learning process and temporary closure of universities. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the practice, challenges, and way forward of ethnic diversity management in Ethiopian public universities.

Method

The study used phenomenological research design to better understand participants’ experiences regarding ethnic diversity management in Ethiopian universities. In Ethiopia, public universities are categorized into four generations based on their year of establishment. Initially, it was planned to collect data from senior and middle-level leaders. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not advisable to travel to different parts of the country. Moreover, senior leaders were busy addressing institutional and national challenges faced as a result of the pandemic. Therefore, the necessary data were generated from 48 deans and associate deans who were participating in the Ethiopian higher education leadership training program. The training requires deans to attend three seminars which are three days each. This made the data generation process easy, fast, and effective. The participants were purposefully selected from 19 universities to obtain different perspectives and views regarding the issue under study from the four generations of universities in the country. A semi-structured in-depth one-to-one interview was used to generate data from 12 participants and group interviews to generate data from six groups consisting of five to eight participants. Participants were selected for a one-to-one or group interview based on their availability and preference.

Document reviews were also used to generate data from official documents including the higher education proclamation (Ministry of Science & Higher Education, 2020), higher education policy and strategy (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2019), and senate legislations. Data obtained through document review were used to corroborate data generated through interviews. The interview and document review data were analyzed using detailed and context-specific thematic analysis. In order to keep confidentiality, in direct quotations, participants were addressed using abbreviations followed by numbers (e.g., Dean of College of Natural and Computational Sciences = DCNCS1, DCNCS2; Dean of School of Law = DSL1, DSL2…).

Results

This section presents the practices, challenges, and prospects of diversity management in Ethiopian universities.
Practices

In the last two decades, most Ethiopian universities have come to embrace the notion of diversity, and this is often reflected in their institutional core values. Participants indicated that managing ethnic diversity should be given the highest priority in the plan and process of addressing challenges facing Ethiopian public universities. However, the higher education proclamation, the higher education policy and strategy, and the 10-year plan of the ministry of science and higher education are not focused on diversity and how to manage diversity. In universities, there is also a clear lack of policies and practices that consider diversity as one of the guiding values that universities promote and uphold in pursuance of their mission.

Participants also indicated that the absence of a clear policy on diversity management in higher education and the politicization of ethnicity are some of the factors for poor diversity management in higher education. In the words of a participant,

> If you look at the [higher education] proclamation and the senate legislation of universities, they barely allude to diversity. So, the diversity issue has not received the attention it deserves from the university leaders and the universities community as a whole. (DCSS1, 9 March 2021)

Although the ultimate goal of diversity management in higher education is to benefit from diversity, participants indicated that creating a positive campus climate for diversity, enhancing positive interactions between students from different ethnic groups, and ensuring peaceful co-existence should be the primary goal of diversity management in Ethiopian universities. University leaders and managers are well aware of the individual, institutional, and national benefits of diversity. However, practical measures taken to benefit from diversity in higher education seemed not to be significant. In relation to this, a participant said that,

> Senior government officials, political leaders, university leaders, and we too say diversity is a beauty. But this must not only be said but also practiced. However, this is not happening and that is why every year there is an ethnic conflict between students in different universities. … I understand that this [diversity] is not what universities alone address, but they have to try their level best. (DCA2, 9 March 2021)

Diversity in higher education is often regarded as a value based on the potential opportunities it provides. In reality, “diversity is not always a value” (Macedo, 2000, p. x) and benefiting from diversity requires good management. That is why diversity management has become a common practice in higher education (Bledsoe et al., 2010) and universities worldwide are adapting and implementing different diversity policies, strategies, and approaches. Although Ethiopian public universities have a diverse student body more than any other setting in the country, they do not have clear diversity management policies and strategies. There are a few activities that contribute to promoting diversity in higher education, but these activities are often underfunded and carried out on an ad hoc and voluntary basis.

University leaders and administrators often do not pay close attention to ethnic diversity until there is tension or conflict that involves different groups. Participants thought that the university could have lessened the impact of ethnic tension and conflict if it had proactive measures and made the necessary follow-up. Studies also indicated the
importance of monitoring the campus climate for diversity and taking timely measures to avoid negative consequences (2007; Roksa et al., 2017).

Proactive diversity management strategy which includes creating a positive campus climate for diversity, curricular diversity (diversity-related courses and pedagogical approaches that promote diversity), and cocurricular diversity (diversity training, workshops, seminars, and campus wide events) should be prioritized because it helps to benefit from diversity by promoting diversity and avoiding diversity-related challenges and problems. However, participants indicated that most universities are engaged in reactive measures which only helps to lessen the negative impacts of diversity-related problems. In the words of a participant,

There are almost no clear proactive measures that universities are using to deal with issues of diversity. So, challenges and problems are inevitable, and as a result, whether it is good or bad, they will take reactive measures to address diversity-related problems. This is often in consultation with government bodies. (DCHS2, 19 March 2021)

Some of the recent major reactive measures taken include (1) a tripartite agreement signed by parents or guardians, students, and government representatives to prevent the involvement of students in ethnic conflict and other major problems on campus, (2) discussions between federal and regional government representatives and students, (3) peacemaking sessions and advice by elderly people and religious and community leaders, (4) severe disciplinary measures (e.g., suspension and expulsion), and (5) involving the military and other security structures when the situation escalates and becomes difficult to manage with university capacity. The ministry also instructed all public universities not to accept any withdrawal request from students in order to oblige students to stay in class. Despite all these measures, universities and the wider Ethiopian society are still suffering from ethnic conflict. This clearly shows that reactive measures are not the only and preferred diversity management strategies.

**Challenges**

The study identified several factors that negatively affect ethnic diversity management in public universities. The major factors include absence of clear policy and strategy, lack of diversity programs and activities, lack of leadership commitment and skills, decreased ethnic diversity of faculty members, and socialization and politicization of ethnicity.

**Absence of clear policy and strategy**

Leaders are often guided by and do their job based on national and institutional policies, strategies, and plans. The inclusion of issues of diversity in such official documents will make diversity one of the issues to be addressed with clear focus, responsibility, and accountability. On the contrary, the absence of clear and feasible national and institutional policies and strategies that direct and support ethnic diversity management will leave diversity as a neglected and an act of goodwill which no one is accountable for. That is also what the participants indicated.

Diversity issues are not a priority in our institutional plan. Therefore, there is no set goal and no expected performance and results. It is not even considered as one of the cross-cutting issues to be addressed. (DLH1, 17 March 2021)
It is not clear which unit of the university is mainly responsible for promoting and addressing diversity-related issues. This is not clearly indicated in the organizational structure and roles and responsibilities of different units of the university. So, no one is responsible and accountable for issues of diversity. Leaders too are not held accountable. When they are held accountable, it is not because they did not manage diversity properly, but because they did not control the problem as any other problem, or because of weak leadership, they have contributed to making the problem worse. (DCNCS2, 10 March 2021)

Studies also indicated that recognizing and including diversity in the mission of a university should be the first step in the process of managing diversity because the plans and activities of a university emerge from its mission (Hurtado, 2005, 2007; Lumadi, 2008). Moreover, a university needs to have aspirations to improve the campus climate for diversity, and this should be included and reflected in its policies, strategic plans, programs, and activities (Brown, 2004). Including issues of diversity in an institutional strategic plan guides a university to intentionally accomplish diversity (Milem et al., 2005).

Socialization and politicization of ethnicity

Since 1991 ethnicity has become the ideological basis of the government’s political organization and administration. As a result, Ethiopia has become a federal polity with eleven ethnic-based regional states and two chartered cities that constitute the federation. The ethnic federalism seems to have facilitated ethnic polarization and a politically motivated superior/inferior dichotomy, which in turn increased ethnocentric attitudes among some ethnic groups (Adamu, 2014). The ethnic polarization has also facilitated the ethnicization of Ethiopian politics, which generated increasing grievances among ethnic groups (Valfort, 2007).

Students who joined university in the last two decades were born or started formal education after the introduction of the ethnic-based federal system. These students have grown up listening to and exercising politicization of ethnicity and manipulating historical interethnic grievances to evoke resentment, fear, and hatred toward the “other.” Children are the product of the family, the society, and the education and political system. Participants indicated that family, communities, media, and education played a role in the negative socialization process. The family and the society did not tell and properly teach their children about tolerance, equality, and unity. Rather, they grew up listening to the victim-abuser story and narration. The education system did not enable them to develop critical, perspective taking and problem-solving skills, and skills required to learn and live with diverse others. Some of the ethnic issues broadcasted and posted in public and social media are divisive, undermine and decrease intergroup trust and relations, and increase intergroup prejudices (Adamu, 2014).

Participants noted that the ethnic-based political system reinforced ethno-national sentiments and segregation along ethnic lines. A study also indicated that the “ethnic-based federal and political system contributed to students’ misconceived ethnic and political orientation, which resulted in their ethnicizing various issues that affected the intergroup relations among students and also led to conflict” (Adamu, 2014, p.144). These issues make the diversity management process difficult when students come to university. In relation to this, a participant said,
What we see in higher education is the result of many factors including the social upbringing and the education system. Students were grown up listening to ethnic hatred, resentment, and revenge. The education system is not helpful in promoting unity and correcting fabrication and falsification of history. ...The higher education curriculum emphasizes on the importance of teaching history for freshman students, but as you may know, so far, there is no history because scholars were not able to agree on the content to be taught. (DCBE6, 18 March 2021)

This clearly indicates that the political discourse and narratives influence and impact the provision of academic knowledge and skills that significantly contributes to managing ethnic diversity in higher education. In general, studies indicated that the ethnic federalism in Ethiopia which takes ethnicity as the basis for its political and administration system (Abbink, 2011) has caused more problems than it was intended to solve (Maru, 2010), and one of the major problems is its negative impacts on managing ethnic diversity in higher education.

Ethnic diversity management can be made more effective by creating a better understanding of issues of diversity among the university community through training, discussion, and education. However, universities are reluctant to do so because of the political sensitivity of ethnic-related issues in Ethiopia.

I think that better than any other government institutions, universities could have created forums where individuals, groups and organizations could present their ideas and listen to others perspectives regarding issues of diversity. However, they are not doing this out of fear of the political consequences of dealing with ethnic issues. (DSS7, 19 March 2021)

Studies indicated that in a society where ethnic differences are prevalent and inevitable, the issue of diversity also becomes one of the central educational and civic missions of higher education (Hurtado, 2007). “Universities [should] also serve as a forum for developing critical thinking and stimulating the exchange of ideas on sensitive socio-political issues which impact on peace and development” (Govender, 2020, par.2). Failure to do so will result in diversity becoming more a problem than an opportunity. It also puts a lot of pressure on diversity management.

The politicization of ethnicity went to the extent that regional states, the community, and students and teachers who are from the dominant ethnic group where the university is located perceive the university as “their university” and other students and teachers feel that they are learning and teaching in a university that belongs to “others.” This is despite the fact that all public universities are owned and funded by and accountable to the federal government. The ethnic politics and ethnic-affiliated leadership selection and appointment have crippled universities to stand and act like a federal university. The new selection and appointment process of senior leaders is more merit-based than ethnic and political affiliation. Any individual both within and outside the university can apply and compete. However, individuals from “other” ethnic groups are not interested to apply because of the politicization of ethnicity and the ethnic-based political and administrative system which may not make them successful applicants and leaders. As a result, most, if not all senior leaders, in all public universities are coming from the region where the university is located. In some cases, this even goes to the extent of having leaders from a specific location within the region. Participants indicated that students who study in such universities might have a low sense of belonging and perceive public universities as less inclusive and hospitable, and this is a challenge for effective diversity management.
Lack of diversity programs and activities

One of the major strategies in promoting and managing diversity in higher education is providing various opportunities for students that help them acquire knowledge about and experience diversity (Umbach & Kuh, 2006). As indicated above, there is no unit or center for diversity in universities and it is no one’s job per se. Participants indicated that universities do not have programs and activities which are purposefully developed to promote and create awareness of diversity.

I have not seen a single initiative developed by any university to promote diversity. In our university and also in other universities, we used to celebrate the nations and nationalities and people’s day. I think the motive for celebrating this event is more of political than cultural and promoting diversity. That is why in the last three years universities were not celebrating this even as usual because of the change in government and politics. (DSL3, 18 March 2021)

Trotting out diversity in higher education, “only during special occasions for public display” (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002, p. 55) can be considered a political strategy. Nevertheless, the political implication of celebrating the nations and nationalities and people’s day is one thing and its contribution to promoting diversity is another thing. Aside from its arguably political implications, the celebration of the nations and nationalities and people’s day at universities seems somehow to contribute to promoting diversity on campus (Adamu, 2014).

Participants also mentioned some activities which have been carried out on an ad hoc basis and contributed to promoting diversity. They also mentioned the “civic and ethical education” course which is provided to all university students. Participants argued that the course could have developed students’ knowledge about diversity but the content of the course is packed more with political and legal than multicultural and diversity issues. Though not directly, as some participants indicated, this course still contributes to promoting diversity through discussions on democracy, equality, and justice which have much to do with issues of diversity. Studies also showed that diversity-related courses have positive effects on students’ complex thinking skills (Hurtado, 2005), cognitive development (Bowman, 2009), and they are effective in reducing biases and developing skills to work with diverse others (Banks, 2001).

Lack of commitment and leadership skills

Leadership is very important for achieving the mission and vision of any organization, and universities are no exception. In the context of higher education institutions, there are several internal and external leadership challenges. One of the greatest challenges that confront leadership in Ethiopian higher education is ethnic diversity. Therefore, leaders need to have good leadership and management skills to address challenges associated with ethnic diversity on campus. Participants noted that most university leaders do not have the skills to effectively manage ethnic diversity.

University-level leaders are elected and appointed from among us. Unless they have the knowledge and skills acquired through reading or experience, I don’t think they have the skills to manage diversity properly. That is why they are not able to come up with strategies to prevent ethnic conflict and prevent ethnic tension and conflict from
escalating. …This also works for us as well. In this regard, we have no better leadership skills than they do. (DCNCS2, 10 March 2021)

Even though there are some who may have the skills, they are not determined to do so. They often follow instructions or alternative solutions from the ministry or other government bodies. This is mainly because they are not responsible for the consequences of any action proposed by the government. But they may be held accountable if the measures they took by themselves disappoint some ethnic groups or escalate the situation. Participants said that leaders lack courage and find it difficult to deal with issues of diversity. They often refrain from taking measures to address ethnic tensions and conflicts among different student ethnic groups. This is mainly because ethnic issues are complex and have many political implications.

One of the ways to manage diversity is by creating awareness among students and the university community about the importance of diversity and the need for mutual respect and tolerance. The other strategy is promoting diversity through creating forums for discussion and providing training on diversity which also helps to correct misconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes. Effective implementation of these diversity management strategies requires a strong commitment of relevant stakeholders, but more than anyone else, leaders and managers need to believe in and support diversity programs and initiatives. This is mainly because no initiative intended to promote diversity can be achieved without the strong support and commitment of the higher officials of an institution (Norris, 2000). Participants indicated that in practice, Ethiopian university leaders lack the courage and commitment to promote and raise awareness about diversity, let alone address serious challenges of ethnic tensions and conflicts. A previous study in Ethiopia also indicated that higher education leaders fail to promote diversity mainly because of a lack of diversity management skills and fear of politicization of diversity-related issues (Adamu, 2013).

Decreased ethnic diversity of faculty members

Participants indicated that increasing and maintaining faculty members’ ethnic diversity is an important strategy for managing student ethnic diversity. A study also indicated that students are happy to see faculty members from their ethnic group and this increases students’ sense of belonging and overall satisfaction with their university, which in turn contributes to managing student diversity (Adamu, 2014).

Participants noted that the recruitment process ensures non-discriminatory employment opportunities and working environment. However, research indicates that there is a tendency for teachers from other regions to leave the university and for teachers from the region where the university is geographically located to come to the university (Adamu & Zellelew, 2007). The university leadership has done nothing to address this issue, and thus, faculty members’ ethnic-related transfer over the past 3 years has been intensified. The increase in numbers of transfers is due to the serious ethnic tensions and conflicts in universities and different parts of the country that followed the change of government leadership in 2018. This is because some faculty members did not feel comfortable and secure to working and living away from family and relatives in such a situation. Some faculty members who support ethnic politics and do not want to work at a university which is located in another ethnic groups’ region and those who want to take advantage of this opportunity to work in a university of their best choice also submitted a transfer request and they were successful. This significantly decreased the diversity of faculty members from different ethnic backgrounds and potentially affects creating an inclusive and welcoming campus climate.
for diversity. Participants noted that instead of developing strategies and taking measures to retain diverse faculty members, universities and the ministry have facilitated faculty members’ ethnic-related transfer requests. The following responses from three deans indicate the ethnic-related transfer requests in different universities:

This should not have happened, but almost all the universities have been releasing and accepting teachers in an unusual and unprecedented way. The ministry has ignored this issue, and at times, it even facilitated the transfer. This is one of the factors for students less interested in studying in universities where there are no teachers from their ethnic group, and I think this seriously affects student ethnic diversity management. (DCA1, 9 March 2021)

In my university, there are still about sixty transfer requests from teachers and most of them want to go to a university which is geographically located in a region where their ethnic group is majority. Universities have contributed to this because they have made the transfer easy and even facilitated this within a short period. They don’t behave like a federal university. Some universities even accept teachers without any communication with the university which the teachers want to leave. (DCNCS8, 10 March 2021)

We do not want to let go teachers from different ethnic backgrounds because we have seen their importance in addressing ethnic-related problems. A discussion between university officials and students to address ethnic-related problems is often successful when university leaders involve teachers from students’ ethnic groups. …I am not sure for how long we will keep them, because the new trend and the political wave are against us. How institutions that are supposed to address ethnic-related problems are involved in activities that escalate ethnic problems. In my view, this is a black historical scar for higher education. (DHS1, 20 March 2021)

The above excerpts clearly indicated the contribution of diverse faculty members to managing student diversity in universities in Ethiopia. Research also showed that diverse faculty members contribute to limiting discrimination claims (Collins & Kritsonis, 2006) which are important for managing diversity. The excerpts also indicated that although this has been threatened by increased transfer which decreased the diversity of faculty members from different ethnic backgrounds, there is no measure taken to attract and retain diverse faculty members.

Way forward

So far, presumably, universities in Ethiopia have not properly managed the ethnic diversity in their own context, let alone played a vital role in addressing the diversity-related problems of the larger society. They seem to have ignored issues of diversity despite the fact they faced several ethnic-related diversity challenges (Adamu, 2014). It is important to note that diversity is not something that will go away through time or ignorance (Levine, 1991).” So, universities should be up to the challenges of diversity.

The Ministry of Education and higher education institutions need to formulate diversity-related national and institutional policies and strategies which help to strategically manage ethnic diversity. Participants noted that national and institutional ethnic diversity policies and strategies should be discussed, accepted, and embraced by relevant stakeholders. They indicated that one of the reasons for poor implementation of policies and strategies in higher education is lack of genuine and purposeful involvement.
of stakeholders in the policy and strategy development process. They also reminded the government not to adopt any diversity management strategy without contextualizing it. Diversity is a phenomenon that is culturally, socially, and historically formed and reformed (Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2008), and thus, effectively addressing issues of diversity in a given context should take into consideration the specific sociocultural, political, and institutional contexts. The outcomes of ethnic diversity management greatly depend more on the way diversity policies, strategies, and initiatives are implemented than how good the policies, strategies, and initiatives look. Therefore, there should be professional and political commitment of the higher education community and government officials to ensure effective implementation of national and institutional diversity management policies and strategies at different levels.

Universities also need to well understand that effective implementation of national and institutional diversity management policies and strategies require understanding their campus climate for ethnic diversity. This is mainly because the campus climate for diversity is context specific. Hence, universities need to do what needs to be done to understand their campus climate for diversity which may require focused research and discussion with relevant stakeholders (Adamu, 2014).

Managing ethnic diversity in Ethiopia is more of a national issue that requires research/evidence-based political interventions. Therefore, the role of HEIs in this regard is twofold. First, they need to contribute to the national level diversity management endeavors through research, dialogue, and producing active citizens. Second, they need to manage the ethnic diversity in their campus.

Studies showed that the contribution of education in managing ethnic diversity is of paramount importance. Hence, the emphasis given to issues of diversity in the education system needs to be revisited. In the Ethiopian education system, schools are not teaching students about morale, self, and culture. Civic and ethical education courses, which are also provided at primary and secondary schools, are supposed to enhance students’ knowledge about morale and promote unity with diversity. However, the Ethiopian education development roadmap indicates that the courses have not been helpful in achieving this objective in schools (Ministry of Education, 2018).

In recent years, universities put emphasis on graduate employability. Yet, what is needed first is good citizens with a great sense of self, moral integrity, responsible citizenship, etc. Therefore, more emphasis should be given to the process of building responsible and active citizenship at all levels of the education system. One of the participants also emphasized on the importance of including diversity-related courses, and he said,

Incorporating diversity-related courses into our education system is a must. If it [diversity-related courses are] is not included in the education system of a country like Ethiopia where ethnic diversity is one of the country’s main features; where ethnicity is the basis for its political and administrative system; and which suffers from ethnic tensions and conflicts, in which country’s education system it should be included then? (DCBE5, 9 March 2021)

Participants commented that it is difficult to manage ethnic diversity in higher education because of different reasons including political sensitivity of ethnic issues. Study also indicated that “managing ethnic diversity stands as a challenging political issue for multi-ethnic societies” (Bélair, 2016, p.1). Yet, universities have to address this challenge in their capacity as socially responsible institutions. They can, among others, raise awareness of diversity, develop diversity management skills of higher education leaders and managers, and enhance and maintain faculty members diversity. In the words of a participant,
It is true that there are several challenges in managing diversity in higher education institutions. But we should not externalize everything because the challenges are both internal and external, and we can at least address the internal challenges. In relation to this, the first thing we need to do is depoliticizing ethnicity. I know this is not as easy as I am saying, but it is not impossible. For example, we can try through creating awareness about diversity, developing our management skills and closely working with the government. (DHS2, 18 March 2021)

Implementing diversity management initiatives and activities are difficult (Treven & Treven, 2007), but it is worth investing because the benefit of managing diversity goes beyond higher education and contributes to the political and social stability in the country. This is the point which helps the attention and interest of the government. As indicated in the above excerpt, it is very important to closely work with the government on issues that require its direction and intervention. As this study revealed, the main sources of most of the challenges and problems associated with student ethnic diversity are external to the universities. This also implies the need for close collaboration with government bodies to effectively manage ethnic diversity in higher education. Participants clearly noted that the core solution should be made at national level. They believe that if the government is able to address issues related to ethnic-federalism and politicization of ethnicity at federal, regional, and group levels, universities will be able to easily manage the ethnic diversity in their campuses.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the politics of ethnic diversity in Ethiopia is a complex issue, and this has made managing student ethnic diversity in higher education a hard and difficult process. Although student ethnic diversity is one of the major challenges faced by public universities, the practice of managing ethnic diversity was found to be low. It is an ad hoc exercise not supported by policies and strategies and no accountability and clearly stated responsible unit. This study found major internal factors (decreased ethnic diversity of faculty members, lack of commitment and leadership skills, absence of institutional diversity policy and strategy and lack of diversity programs and activities) and external factors (absence of national diversity policy and strategy, socialization, and politicization of ethnicity) that affect effective implementation of diversity management. Yet, politicization of ethnicity is found to be the mother of all challenges associated with student ethnic diversity management in higher education. Therefore, although effective student ethnic diversity management requires the active participation and commitment of universities, communities, and the government, in the Ethiopian context, addressing issues related to the ethnic political and administrative system is the highest priority. This is a long-term plan which requires political commitment and public consensus. Hence, universities need not wait for this to happen. They should take different measures that help to address ethnic diversity management. In the short-term, instead of establishing units that address only issues related to gender and disability, the ministry of education needs to promote and support universities to establish centers for diversity and inclusion which primarily works to address diversity-related issues including ethnic, gender, and disability, among others. This center should be active and ensure the promotion of diversity in curricular and non-curricular activities, and this enforces universities to pay attention to diversity and its management. Moreover, the ministry and universities need also to take the strongest possible
measures against students directly or indirectly involved in intensifying ethnic tensions and conflicts. Finally, this study did not look into the ethnic diversity of leaders which has its own potential influence in managing and/or intensifying diversity-related problems. Therefore, it is important for further research on diversity management to consider this aspect as well.

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank Addis Ababa University for its generous support of this research.

Funding This research is generously funded by Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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