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CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN ERITREA IN THE POST-INDEPENDENT PERIOD TO THE PRESENT – A CASE OF ASMARA UNIVERSITY

By Ravinder Rena¹

Abstract:

Eritrean higher education faced numerous challenges over many years. It was particularly suffered during the colonial periods. Eritrea exerted its efforts to develop its dilapidated educational system with the advent of its independence. Eritrea celebrated its sixteenth birthday recently. However, the educational challenges in higher education still remain high. The government of Eritrea established different colleges in different administrative regions. The University of Asmara is the only university in the country that had to be revitalized after its devastation by the 30-year war of independence. Since independence, the University has been able to contribute to the nation's skill manpower considerably. This paper examines higher education of Eritrea for about 60 years period. It delves the University of Asmara and its birth, development and apogee. The paper also gives some insights on recent educational development in Eritrea.

Keywords: Higher education, Eritrea, Asmara University, Colonial period, Educational development, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Eritrea is a new nation in the Horn of Africa with a population of approximately 4.3 million. The modern history of Eritrea dates back to the period of colonization, by Italy during more than 50 years (1890-1941) and later for about ten years under the administration of the Great Britain. Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952 by United Nations' resolution. During the period 1952-1962, the Ethiopian regime undermined the federation and ultimately annexed Eritrea as one of the provinces of Ethiopia without the United Nations taking action to defend its own resolution or the people of Eritrea. In 1961, an armed struggle for liberation began and lasted for thirty years. On 24 May 1991 the thirty-year war concluded with a victory of the Eritrean people. In May 1993, Eritrea declared its independence following an internationally supervised referendum (Pankhurst, 1972; Pool, 2000; Wrong, 2005; Rena, 2006e).

Under the colonial administrations, educational opportunities for Eritreans were very limited and focused on colonial cultures and social experiences. Policymakers generally agree that the most important factor in the process of socioeconomic development is the training of all-round skilled manpower which involves appropriate skills, knowledge, attitudes, motivations and resourcefulness to bring about improvements in quality of production, services, technology and management

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(Thompson and Fogel, 1976; World Bank, 2002; Rena, 2006d). Accordingly, since independence, Eritrea has focused on the education of its people, which is a vital element in the process of rebuilding its shattered social and economic infrastructure (World Bank, 2003; David, 2004; Rena, 2006a).

During the 1970s and '80s the principal opposition movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) developed an alternative educational system in the "liberated areas." Schools had to be held under cover for fear of aerial bombardment by the Ethiopian air force. Many schoolchildren and teachers were killed or injured in such attacks (Pool, 1997; Rena, 2005b).

On 24 May 1991, the EPLF defeated the Ethiopian army in Eritrea and succeeded its independence. For the last 16 years of independence, Eritrea has been facing many challenges in rebuilding and reconstructing its educational system, from scratch. In the field of higher education, the Government of Eritrea is attempting to fuse the shadow that remained of Asmara University with the Research and Information Center on Eritrea (RICE), a loose association of Eritrean academics throughout the world and in the EPLF-administered areas themselves. Creative approaches are required to tap the skills of Eritrean academics to create a new university that fulfills the government's stated aim of respecting academic freedom.

The University of Asmara is a young and very small institution that had to be revitalized after its devastation by the 30-year war of independence. Since independence, the University has been able to contribute to the nation's skill manpower pool 2,821 baccalaureate degree, diploma, certificate holders out of which 491 were girls and over 1200 civil servants who have undergone intensive 8 weeks of training at the management institute. The performance of University with respect to achieving high functional standards is yet to be rigorously evaluated.

Method and Material

The main method employed in this study was an analysis of relevant literature and a critical reflection on the author's research work related to the subject matter. The literature search included two main steps: Internet search of accessible and available material on higher education in Eritrea, manual search of existing literature, and communication with some officers and subject experts to locate published and unpublished works and to understand the higher education situation before independence.

The university has relatively more capacity as compared to its local partners therefore the local linkage is some what skewed. On the other hand the centres of excellence with which the university is linked have much more resources and capacity as compared to the University of Asmara.¹ For example, Eritrean Center for Organizational Excellence was established in October 2006 with the following objectives: i] To render different administrative training; ii] To give advice to institutions which helps them to give efficient services to their customers; and iii] To introduce necessary techniques to increase production. I strongly believe that this working paper offers some valuable alternatives for enabling institutions of higher learning in contributing to national development especially in developing countries and in due course we hope to be able to prove its validity.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN ERITREA UNDER HAILE SELASSIE

Asmara University originated from the efforts of the Comboni Sisters in Asmara. During the 1950s, the sisters were running the Santa Familia Secondary School and planned to upgrade it to university status. In 1958, following consultations with the University of Bologna, Italy, they founded the Santa Familia University on a small site adjacent to their school. Italian was the medium of instruction. The university was recognized by the then-government of Eritrea. The university was small and poorly-equipped but the Comboni Sisters notably two dynamic members of the order, Sister Maria-Nora and Sister Fosca were determined to build a substantial institution. In 1960, the Superior Council of the Institute of Italian Universities recognized the university. The university was created and maintained in the face of determined opposition from sections of the Ethiopian government, and during the rule of Mengistu Haile Mariam was turned into another instrument to subvert Eritrean nationalist claims (Tekie, 2004; Rena, 2007).

Following the abrogation of the Federation in 1962, the Comboni Sisters approached the Ministry of Education in Addis Ababa in an attempt to obtain recognition from the Ethiopian government. The then Vice-Minister of Education, Dr. Mengesha Gebrehiwot, who was a Roman Catholic, supported them.² Dr. Mengesha proposed that the name be changed to Asmara University, and that Haile Selassie be approached with the request that he be Chancellor. The Sisters agreed to both proposals. Haile Selassie accepted the Chancellorship, but when he was asked to visit Asmara and confer degrees on the graduating students, the Ministry of Education objected. The Minister, Akelework Habte Wold, did not want the university or its degrees to be recognized. He sent a clandestine mission to the University and reported that standards were inadequate. The mission had neither examined students nor interviewed staff. Meeting with the Emperor and officials from the University, Akelework insisted that a second assessment mission be sent before any degrees be conferred by the Emperor. Haile Selassie finally overruled his minister, and visited Asmara to award the degrees (Africa Watch, 1993).

Akelework still sent his delegation, which recommended that the University be downgraded to a "junior college". After a struggle, in which the University defended its standards by reference to Italian Universities, this recommendation was also abandoned (Africa Watch, 1993; Rena, 2005b).

The university then faced a struggle to expand from its small premises. A large plot of land had been acquired and a four-story building, built around a courtyard, had been designed. The Sisters had obtained the finance. However, it emerged that a conspiracy existed, including the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and members of the Italian community in Asmara³, to prevent further construction of the building. The Italian contractor had undertaken to build the full four stories, but had stopped after completing only one, claiming his contract was now fulfilled. Despite intimidation, the University lawyer, Kenazmach Gila Mikael Bahta, took the case to court and after having his initial case rejected by a corrupt judge won on appeal. The University was awarded Ethiopian Birr 900,000 for breach of contract, plus expenses, and the building was completed as planned (Africa Watch, 1993; Rena, 2005c).

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However, at the point of victory, internal politics in the Comboni order caused the election of a new Mother-General, a little-educated Sister who was averse to confrontation. She refused to accept the damages, save the small sum of Ethiopian Birr 30,000, and removed Sister Maria-Nora (sent back to Italy and confined to her home) and Sister Fosca (sent to Bahrain). Thereafter, the Comboni Sisters proved content to pursue far more modest educational aims. The teaching staff was reduced and the curriculum restricted. An ambitious plan for the construction of a nine-story tower was cancelled. Sisters Maria-Nora and Fosca had already obtained the money and building materials, and arranged for students and lecturers from the civil engineering faculty to build the tower as part of their practical education. A crane was erected which still stands two decades later. The new leadership sold the building materials and abandoned the project. Following the revolution, the Order was happy to hand the university over to the government (Africa Watch, 1993; Rena, 2007).

Perhaps the most successful measure by the Haile Selassie government to deny higher education to Eritreans was the introduction of a quota system for access to University. The system was not exactly a quota, but a calibration of examination scores according to province of origin. Students from provinces with poor educational endowment such as Gemo Gofa and Sidamo Chad to achieve lower marks to gain entrance to University compared to those with better schools such as Eritrea. What made this otherwise-acceptable scheme into a form of discrimination was that the threshold score for Eritrea was set higher than for other Ethiopian provinces, such as Shewa, which were given better educational resources (Rena, 2006b).

It observed that Eritrea had better educational facilities than Ethiopia before the Federation. The education was indeed developed during the period of British Military Administration (1941-52). The educational system was under the Eritrean government, and thus independent of Addis Ababa. It used Arabic and Tigrinya (the language of the highlands, which is written in the indigenous Ge'ez script) up to grade four, and English thereafter. A Publications Committee within the Department of Education, founded in 1953, developed its own Tigrinya textbooks and imported Arabic textbooks from Egypt (Rena, 2005b).

During the period of the federation (1952-62), the Emperor Haile Selassie worked to undermine all Eritrean institutions that included the educational system. In 1957, the Ethiopian Educational Attache in Asmara began to import Amharic textbooks and teachers from Ethiopia, under instructions from the Ministry of Education in Addis Ababa. Amharic is the language of government in Ethiopia, though it is not spoken as a first language in Eritrea. Amharic was taught as a foreign language in Eritrean schools, and the Ethiopian teachers received 30 per cent higher pay than their Eritrean counterparts, as a "hardship allowance" (Africa Watch, 1993; Rena, 2005c).

Following Haile Selassie's abrogation of the federation and annexation of Eritrea in 1962, the policy of Ethiopianization intensified and all decisions pertaining to Eritrea were made in Addis Ababa. In 1963, the Publications Committee was abolished, and the Arabic and Tigrigna textbooks it had earlier commissioned or imported were destroyed by burning. Amharic became the medium of instruction

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throughout the educational system from first grade. The Amharic language also became a compulsory subject for admission to university in Eritrea (Teshome, 1974; Rena, 2005b).

Keeping the oppression in mind, teachers and students started the Eritrean nationalist movement during period from 1957 to 1967. The first strike occurred in 1957 at the Haile Selassie Secondary School (now the Red Sea Secondary School-Asmara). This school, run by the Federal Government and was the first place in which Amharic was made compulsory. In response to the strike, 300 students were detained at Adi Quala prison for one month. No sooner was this strike settled than discontent spread to the Prince Mekonnen Secondary School; frequent strikes occurred for a decade (Teshome, 1974; Rena, 2005b).

In 1963, the teachers went on strike. The important reason was the pay differential between Eritrean and Ethiopian teachers, working under the same conditions since all teachers were employed by the same Ministry, in Addis Ababa, no administrative reasons could be adduced for maintaining the discrepancy. The underlying reason was, however, unhappiness at the Ethiopian government's policies, and sympathies for the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which had just started a guerrilla war. The government threatened to dismiss the teachers, and brought replacement trainee teachers to take their place, but backed down when the strike spread to the student population. Although, it was very late, the pay issue was resolved in 1966 (Africa Watch, 1993; Teshome, 1974; Rena, 2006d).

Throughout this period, many teachers were active in the "Committee of Seven" (*Mahber Showate*) movement, a clandestine nationalist organization, structured around seven-member cells. Many teachers were arrested and detained on account of alleged involvement in this movement; emergency powers assumed by the governor to combat banditry allowed him to detain suspected political opponents for three months without trial. A larger number of teachers were transferred to the interior part of Ethiopia, and replaced by Ethiopian teachers.

In 1967, large-scale military confrontations began between the Ethiopian army and the forces of the ELF. The expression of civil dissent through trade unions and schools effectively ceased. Young nationalists directly joined the guerrillas; and especially after the declaration of a State of Emergency in 1970 any sign of dissent in the schools was immediately identified with subversion and dealt with accordingly. The new governor, Ras Asrate Kassa, also took a more conciliatory line to teachers and students who showed no overt dissent. Teachers and students thus became more cautious, and the beginning of a long period of 24 years of enforced self-censorship began. In contrast to Addis Ababa, students in Eritrea played little part in the events of the revolution of 1974.

EDUCATION IN ERITREA AFTER THE REVOLUTION

In September and October 1974, there were hopes of a negotiated settlement to the Eritrean war. Following the assassination of General Aman Andoum, and the killing of 60 senior officials from the Emperor's government in November 1974, a committee of 38 respected Eritrean citizens was chosen by elders of the community in the hope of helping the new government settle the problem of Eritrea by negotiation. However, the army also launched a severe crackdown in Eritrea. Many youths were killed by the security services, often by strangling with piano wire.

Reprisals were taken against most of the committee of 38, including several prominent educationalists. During the following three years, there was a steadily increasing level of harassment and violence against educated Eritreans. This peaked in the Red Terror of 1977-78. As elsewhere in Ethiopia, teachers and students were a particular target. Thousands were detained and many were executed (Adane, 1992; Rena, 2006c).

At the outbreak of the revolution in 1974, there had been 3,000 Eritrean teachers in Eritrean schools. By the end of the decade, this number had fallen to about 1,200. As well as those killed or forced from the profession, the policy of transferring Eritreans to Ethiopia and vice versa continued. By 1980, more than 2,000 non-Eritrean teachers including Indians were teaching in Eritrea (Rena, 2006e).

It is found that the liberal reforms of the revolutionary government in some areas had little impact on education in Eritrea. The literacy campaign, which used nine languages, including Tigrinya, might appear to have been intended to reverse the dominance of Amharic. However, only adults benefited from the campaign, which was largely confined to the main towns. Amharic remained compulsory in schools. (Incidentally, the literacy campaign neither recognized nor taught literacy in Arabic, one of the major languages used in Eritrea, and indeed in parts of Ethiopia, especially in centers of Moslem learning.)

In the mid 1970s, private non-mission schools were nationalized throughout Ethiopia. Mission schools remained unaffected except in Eritrea, where these schools were also nationalized, in 1982. Standards plummeted, as the state did not have the resources to maintain the schools. Class sizes doubled. By 1988, of 832 students in the twelfth grade of the Comboni School (currently, the Barka School -Asmara), only three reached the required standard to progress to University. Thus, by the 1980s, the Eritrean educational system was totally under the heel of an Ethiopian administration committed to the forcible Ethiopianization of Eritrea. Relatively little pressure was needed to maintain this state of affairs; those who opposed it fled to the hills to join the EPLF (Tekie, 2004; Rena, 2006b).

Surveillance was constant in the educational system. All teachers were obliged to attend weekly classes in Marxism-Leninism, in which their adherence to the official philosophy could be scrutinized and assessed. Official publications were read and funds were raised for political or military activities. Teachers who wanted promotion, or who wanted civil rights such as easy access to travel permits, were usually obliged to join the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), the single state party.

EPLF Educational Policy

The EPLF began its own educational programs in the mid 1970s, and expanded them during the 1980s. Inside Eritrea, the physical conditions were extremely difficult. Along with all other aspects of life, the schools had to be concealed from the danger of air attack. Schools were thus held underground or beneath camouflage, and evacuations to air raid shelters were frequent. Basic equipment was also in very short supply, and there was a chronic problem of lack of qualified teachers.

Following on from the policies of the ELF and the British Military Administration, Tigrinya and Arabic are the two national languages of Eritrea used by the EPLF. These two languages are taught compulsorily. For the most part, however, primary

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education is in the native language of the community. To date, primary curricula have also been developed in Tigre (Ge'ez script), and Kunama, Saho and Afar (Latin script). Bilen, and Nara curricula are developed. Hedareb speakers prefer to use Tigre or Arabic language (Rena, 2005b).

Academic Freedom under the Dergue

During the Dergue regime (1974-91) there were a number of egregious abuses against academic freedom at Asmara University. An early incident was the killing of Dr. Petros Habtemikael, an economist, in 1975. Dr. Petros taught extension courses in the evening, and some of his students were Ethiopian military officers, who objected to his use of Eritrean rather than Ethiopian examples in his coursework, and to the low grades they were given. It believed that the officers caused Dr. Petros to be detained and executed (Africa Watch, 1993).

For the most part, the Dergue's policy was to undermine the autonomy of Asmara University and make it an instrument of its rule. After coming under government control in 1977, Asmara University was placed directly under the supervision of the commission for Higher Education unlike Addis Ababa University, which retained a degree of autonomy. Amharic became the language of administration. The University was starved of resources, which were preferentially targeted to Addis Ababa University. For example, a grant from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for the Faculty of Science was held up while the Commission for Higher Education tried, ultimately unsuccessfully, to have it diverted to Addis Ababa. In 1982, after the question of the nine-story building for the University had been revived, the government directed that the university should instead take over existing secondary school premises in Asmara. Mission schools were then confiscated. This was an example of ostensibly assisting the University, but denying Eritrean students the opportunity to obtain the necessary education to attend it. In the event, most of the confiscated schools were merely nationalized and only two became university premises.

It is important to note during the 1980s, a consistent policy was followed of preferring non-Eritrean teachers and students. By 1990, 62 per cent of the staff were non-Eritreans, and 91 per cent of the students were from the interior part of Ethiopia. The University was known as "Asmara University for the Northern Regions of Ethiopia."

Asmara University was in effect controlled, not by the Senate and the academic staff, but by the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) and the security. All the restrictions present in Addis Ababa University were amplified in Asmara. The WPE required that a member be present at all discussions, whether they be academic or staff-related; it also demanded a transcript of all proceedings. The Students' Union was part of the Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association, and thus a branch of the government/party apparatus. Cadres sat in on all classes and reported on the ideological correctness of both staff and students. An absurd extreme was reported in which a biology student was criticized by a cadre for giving a presentation to her classmates on the subject of photosynthesis in plants, in which she failed to demonstrate the relevance of the dialectical materialist approach to the subject. This led to a claustrophobic atmosphere that effectively precluded all free debate, and forced all students and staff to exercise strict self-censorship. It also

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allowed the University President and other influential people to exercise blatant favoritism and nepotism in the award of scholarships and promotions.

Open dissent was almost unknown at the University. A rare example occurred in 1985, when the staff demanded extra payment for teaching extension classes in the evening in line with their colleagues in Addis Ababa. Two staff members were briefly detained and many others given a formal warning. It was necessary to read Asmara University publications and debates with a care and attention to have an independent thinking.

The culmination of the assault on the University occurred in July 1990, when the decision was announced to transfer it to the internal part of Ethiopia. Ostensibly because of the intensification of the war following EPLF advances, there are indications that the decision to relocate the University was in fact taken some months earlier. The Minister of Education and other officials from Addis Ababa flew to Asmara to discuss the proposed move with the staff. It was obvious that the Eritrean staff opposed the move almost unanimously, the Ethiopian staff remained silent. Only two voices were raised in support of the proposal. Nevertheless, the university was moved. All the textbooks, laboratory equipment, computers and office equipment were moved, apart from some items hidden by Eritrean staff members. Social sciences, agriculture and languages were moved to a former peasant training center at Agarfa, in Bale in the far south of Ethiopia. Conditions there, for both living and teaching, were very poor. The other faculties were moved to Addis Ababa, where facilities were shared with Addis Ababa University. Teaching took place in the afternoon and evening. The staff of Addis Ababa University resented the additional burden on their resources and granted little cooperation. This state of affairs lasted for just over one semester, after which the students were required for military service, and the university was closed (Rena, 2007).

RICE, HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE EPLF

Eritrean academics and other professionals were unable to practice their profession at home, thus most of them opted for exile. While many worked and published purely as individuals, some contributed their skills to the Research and Information Center on Eritrea (RICE). RICE was set up in Rome in 1979 and quickly grew to have chapters in five European countries, plus Canada and the USA. Though formally independent, it was closely linked with the aims of the EPLF. It published the journal *Eritrea Information* as well as research bulletins, and held conferences and seminars. Besides, the RICE operated as a loose federation of self-governing chapters, held together by a common commitment to the cause of the EPLF. In 1988, the headquarters of RICE, including its principal Documentation Center, was transferred to the EPLF-held areas of Eritrea. However, the European and American chapters of RICE continued to function in their accustomed heterogeneous style. At its re-founding congress, RICE included an article on academic freedom in its constitution (Government of Eritrea, 2003).

Following the defeat of the Ethiopian army in May 1991, the Provisional Government of Eritrea, run by the EPLF, for the first time confronted with the need for a systematic policy on higher education. The results have been generally encouraging, though some worries persist. Asmara University is to be reestablished as an Eritrean institution. It is to be given a charter which will make it

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independent and self-governing. Its major problem is lack of resources not all the resources transferred to Ethiopia in 1990 have been recovered, and even these would be grossly incommensurate with the needs.

The shadow that remained of Asmara University has been reorganized under a new President, Andeberhan Wolde Giorgis. Staff has been brought from the EPLF and from abroad, including Sudan. A social and political distance exists between staff who remained in Asmara during the *Dergue's* rule and those who were "in the field" or abroad, and this has led to some instances of mutual distrust. While there is no overt manipulation of appointments, still less an attack on Eritrean academics, it is likely that the new academic order will see rewards going to those who served the EPLF loyally during "the struggle," and that academics who are overtly critical of the EPLF's record or its policies will find themselves marginalized (Africa watch,1993; Rena,2006e).

Asmara University, as the only prominent institution of higher education in Eritrea, has shown a tendency for centralization. RICE has been brought under the Institute for Research and Development Studies, an autonomous institute within the University. No facility has been made for any form of association with the institute, so that the RICE Chapters abroad have been disbanded. Whether from over-zealous administrative tidiness or from a desire to establish centralized control over higher education, this move would appear to threaten one of the most important Eritrean academic institutions. Many Eritrean academics will be unable or unwilling to abandon their careers abroad to return home permanently, and this move denies them the opportunity for a looser association with academic pursuits at home. As well as denying Eritrea the services of many of its academics, this move also threatens the academic freedom of the Eritrean diaspora. The internationalism of Eritrean studies is not redundant.

DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND CURRENT CHALLENGES OF UNIVERSITY OF ASMARA

Eritrea faces a serious shortage of skilled manpower in many fields of society. As the only university-level institute of higher education in the country, the importance and the role of the University of Asmara in supplying the needed skilled manpower is noteworthy for about 15 years. When Eritrea reopened the university in 1991, new plans were drawn up for the future. Three guiding principles are being implemented in this rebuilding process:

- relevance to society's needs
- the quality of the educational system, *and*
- sustainability

Aspirations and perspectives of the UoA are to develop into a regional centre of excellence but first and foremost to be an institute that serves 'national needs'. To this end the "internal linkages" – within Eritrea with relevant societal partners – have been established to ensure the relevance of the curricula provided by the university. The external linkages (with international donor organisations and well reputed universities) are created to safeguard the high quality and international standards of the various programmes. The third guiding principle for rebuilding the UoA, as described above, is sustainability.

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The University of Asmara has developed its own strategy for cooperation with international donors. According to their 'linkage model', the UoA prefers to limit the number of donors which support a faculty or unit, to a minimum. This focused approach does not mean that donors will be operating in isolation, because the general parameters of institutional development have been clearly defined and have been incorporated in the priorities of the individual faculties or service units. Coordination at institutional level is present to ensure that donor support contributes to the overall institutional development of UoA. To this end, an International Projects Coordinator was appointed at the central level of the university. In addition, a number of review meetings have been organised since 1997 to assess the achievements of individual projects (supported by several different donors) within the framework of the overall institution building process of the UoA. These Project Coordination Committee (PCC) meetings have been held in Asmara and all donors and implementing institutes of the specific projects are invited to attend. During more recent years, however, they have tended to fall away (Rena, 2007).

The focus of the University of Asmara (UoA) till recently was on undergraduate studies. Through funds abstained from the government and bilateral cooperation agreements, the University consolidated and expanded its undergraduate programmes. The UoA has about 260 faculty members with about 120 PhD holders, over 50 of whom are nationals teaching in 43 departments. The qualitative and quantitative changes in the UoA have resulted in a noticeable upgrading of the trained workforce in the country. Since 1992, the UoA has supplied a workforce about 9000 graduates, of whom more than half are graduates at the Bachelor's level. The University remains committed to producing medium and high-level manpower that share the supreme ideal of working in a spirit of commitment, understanding, and cooperation towards the common purpose of better serving the nation.

Having built its capacity thus, the UoA established the School of Graduate Studies in July 2004, after two years of preparation, to administer the graduate programmes within various Colleges. This was done after preliminary needs assessment for graduate programmes made in 1995 (had indicated that there was a need for up to 1,000 persons trained at the Master's level. The need for highly qualified workforce at the Master's level at present is believed to be much higher: The School of Graduate Studies is headed by a Dean, who is assisted by the Board of Graduate Studies constituted of 10 senior faculty. In September 2004, the School took its first intake of 35 students in six fields of study: Agronomy, Horticulture, Applied Soil Science, Sustainable Livestock Production, Development Economics, and Organic Chemistry. Of these, 27 are graduated at the end of 2005/06 academic year. In September 2005, was added to the existing fields. Their number is 10 in the academic year 2006/2007.

The considerable growth of UoA is however expected to continue over the next decade with the Masters and research programmes. With enrolment having more than quadrupled since the reopening, space has become a major constraint. The Asmara Multi-Campus Programme, one of the two components of the Cooperation for Asmara Multi-Campus and University System (CAMPUS) programme, will help to provide new teaching facilities. It envisages the creation of six colleges located at different regions of the country, they are:

- Mendefera (College of Natural and Paramedical Sciences);
- Asmara (Orotta School of Medicine);
- Asmara (College of Nursing and Health Technology);
- Hamalmalo(Keren) (College of Agriculture Sciences);
- Mai Nefhi (Eritrean Institute of Technology and Teacher Education);
- Adi Queiyh (College of Arts and Social Sciences);
- Halhale (College of Business and Economics) and at
- Hircigo(Massawa) (College of Marine and Maritime Sciences).

The construction of the Mendeferra College has already been started during the year 2005-2006. This college is expected to have an intake capacity of around 2,500 students. Construction is almost completed. Besides this physical expansion, the UoA is realigning its mission to include institutional research activities (Rena, 2006a). To further its new aspirations, UoA held an International Research Symposium in summer 2002 to evaluate the effectiveness of the research conducted so far, and to outline its strategy to become a research centre in the future. Cooperation with partners in the South is also being emphasised. Strong ties are currently being developed with universities in South Africa, through the Human Resources Development Project (HRDP). Plans are also underway to develop joint MSc programmes, covering various fields like Economics, Chemistry with some of these South African partner universities. For the first time in the year 2006, the University of Asmara has produced 49 Master Degree holders. However, the uncertainty resulting from the border war with Ethiopia has had a negative, or certainly a constraining, effect on many of the university's development aims.

Conclusion

Lack trained manpower is one of the major hindrances to rapid socio-economic transformation of Eritrea. The Government of the State of Eritrea exerted efforts to develop the human resources through higher education and thus improve the backward economy of the country into an advanced one. As stated earlier, the higher education has suffered many folds during different periods. Even after sixteen years of its independence, the country could not achieve its desired goals in developing the quality higher education. Yet it is mostly depending on Indian expatriate teaching faculty at higher level of learning.

Notes

1 Asmara University has been closed by September 2006. All the existing staff and students are assimilated with that of newly established Eritrea Institute of Technology and other related colleges. It assumed that the university will start again with post-graduate and research programmes in the country.

2 As stated in Africa Watch (1993) Vol. 5, No. 1; (12 January) that Dr. Mengesha was imprisoned by the *Dergue* in 1985 on suspicion of anti-government activities. He was tortured and had his leg amputated, after which he "disappeared" from prison.

3 Some members of the Italian community in Asmara have historically been hostile to Eritreans obtaining an education, fearing that Italians would lose their privileged position in the city.

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