Intergroup Relations Among Ethnically Diverse University Students in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study focused on examining the intergroup relations among ethnically diverse university students. The study was conducted in Bahir Dar University, one of the public universities in Ethiopia– a country of "indigenous ethnic diversity". The participants were students, teachers and support staff selected using purposive and snowball sampling. Necessary data were collected through interview and focus group discussion. The study revealed different factors that facilitate and impede intergroup relations among students. The study also showed that students generally have positive attitude toward outgroups and developing positive intergroup relations. This finding has very strong implications in managing intergroup relations not only in universities but also in the society. The university management, however, was found unable to provide much support to such positive attitudes and promoting diversity mainly because of lack of institutional priority as well as managers' confidence and diversity management skills.

Keywords: Ethiopia, diversity, ethnicity, intergroup relations, university students

Introduction

Studies that investigated intergroup relations among people of diverse backgrounds indicate that exposure and interaction among members of diverse groups lessens intergroup prejudice and intergroup tension and conflict (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), promotes positive and tolerant attitudes toward outgroups (Shook & Fazio, 2008), and improves intergroup relations (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Schofield, Hausmann, Ye, & Woods, 2010).

Allport's seminal work *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) has served as the basis for the contact theory which is influential in the study of intergroup relations. The fundamental assumption of contact theory is that when people from different backgrounds have the

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opportunity to contact with each other, they find it more difficult to hold prejudices against one another. Contact potentially reduces prejudice by enhancing knowledge about the outgroups, reducing anxiety about intergroup contact, and increasing empathy (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). In order to enhance positive effects of intergroup contact and thereby improve positive intergroup relations, Allport (1954) has suggested four necessary conditions that need to be met: (1) equal group status within the situation; (2) common goals; (3) intergroup cooperation instead of competition; and (4) institutional support (the support of authorities, law, or custom).

Based on the outcomes of various studies, Pettigrew (1998) has suggested a fifth condition which is referred to as "friendship potential". Pettigrew argues that in order to enhance positive effects of intergroup contact, people from different background should get to know each other as friends, and "the contact situation must provide the participants with the opportunity to become friends" (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 76). Cross-group friendship or friendship between people of different backgrounds invokes three of Allport's optimal conditions (institutional support is the exception) for positive intergroup contact effects (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Cross-group friendship enhances more positive attitude towards outgroups and develops a feeling of trust in relation to outgroups, and this in turn promotes positive intergroup relations (Tropp, 2008). Research indicates that having more outgroup friends leads to lower prejudice and vice versa, but the effect of having more outgroup friends on lowering prejudice is more than the effect of lower prejudice on having more outgroup friends (Pettigrew, 1997).

In the last three decades, there have been several studies that focus on intergroup relations in universities and colleges (Engberg, 2004; Hurtado, 2005). Despite significant advances in intergroup contact theory and our understanding of intergroup relations on campus, majority of past studies in this arena have focused primarily on universities and colleges in the Western countries where increased ethnic diversity often results from migration and (recently) internationalization of higher education. There is a clear lack of research which investigates intergroup relations in universities and colleges in non-Western countries, particularly in countries that have "indigenous ethnic diversity"[1]. Diversity is a phenomenon that culturally, socially and historically formed and reformed, and in order to broaden our knowledge about diversity-related issues such as intergroup relations we should study them within specific socio-cultural, political and geographic regions (Metcalfe & Woodhams,

2008). Moreover, most previous studies on intergroup relations did not clearly indicate different factors that enhance and impede intergroup relations in different contexts. Therefore, the present paper aims to examine the intergroup relations among ethnically diverse university students in Ethiopia which is known as a country of "indigenous ethnic diversity". The paper primarily focuses on exploring factors that facilitate and impede positive intergroup relations, and examining efforts made to improve positive intergroup relations among ethnically diverse university students. While exploring these factors, the paper also examines students' perspective on the need for developing positive intergroup relations.

Overview of Ethnic Diversity in Ethiopia and its Universities

Ethiopia has been described as "a museum of peoples" (Wagaw, 1999) whose population is characterized by a "complex pattern of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups" (Tronvoll, 2000, p. 6). There are about 83 ethnic groups. For the majority part of the modern history of the country, the Amhara was the dominant ethnic group. In the late 19th century along with the powerful expansion that created the present state of Ethiopia, the Amharic language and the Amhara cultural values dominated the diverse ethnic groups of southern Ethiopia (Gudina, 2007). The ethnic groups incorporated into the empire were believed to be treated as subjects, and predominantly, their culture, language and identity were suppressed (Mengisteab, 1997).

In 1991, the current government came to power and introduced an ethnicity-based federal system. Consequently, ethnicity has become the ideological basis of the government's political organization and administration (Abbink, 1997). According to the state policy, Ethiopian unity or national identity is based on the recognition and accommodation of diversity (Van der Beken, 2012). Studies indicate that contrary to the very problem it was intended to address, the implementation of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia seems to have created more problems than it set to solve (Gudina, 2007). It is believed that there are several ethnic tensions and conflicts in the country more than ever before because of ethnic boundaries, ethnic identities, scarce resources and power rivalry (Aalen, 2011). Higher education institutions are one of the contexts where ethnic tensions and conflicts occur, and there is an increasing concern that they become the major battlefields for ethnic conflict in Ethiopia.

The first higher education institution in Ethiopia was founded in 1950 as University College of Addis Ababa. After more than six decades, there are now 31 public universities. These universities seem to have highly ethnically diverse population than other interactive settings such as schools, residences and workplaces. Because of the diverse student population they have from every corner of the country, public universities are often considered "mini-Ethiopia" (Adamu, 2007; Adamu & Zellelew, 2007).

Public universities in Ethiopia are not entitled to select and admit their prospective regular undergraduate students. Student admission and placement is carried out at the central level by the Ministry of Education mainly based on the guideline for student placement in public universities. The admission and placement is one of the basic factors that contribute to increase in student diversity in universities.[2] The presence of diverse student population on campus seems an ideal situation where the five conditions that enhance positive effects of intergroup contact could be met. This is so because a university provides an environment where students are generally considered to be of equal status regardless of their backgrounds; they are expected to work cooperatively to achieve common goals; cross-group friendships are viable; and higher officials and university's legislation, rules and regulations are supposed to facilitate diversity and positive intergroup relations.

Method

This study employed qualitative study approach to support in-depth examination of the intergroup relations among students from participants' point of view and in a given social and institutional context. The study was conducted in Bahir Dar University (BDU), one of the public universities in Ethiopia. It is located in the city of Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara National Regional State. It became a university in 2000 as a result of the merger of two higher education institutions - Bahir Dar Polytechnic Institute (established in 1953) and Bahir Dar Teachers College (established in 1972). BDU has a population of about 41,000 students pursuing their studies in regular, extension, summer and distance programs, and about 1,300 academic staff.

The data were collected between January and April 2012. The majority of the data were collected from 41 students from 12 different ethnic backgrounds (Afar, Amhara, Gambella[3], Gedio, Gurage, Gumuz, Oromo, Sidama, Somali, Tigre, Wolayita, and Mixed ethnicity)[4]. This helped me to understand the issue under study from the points of view of different ethnic groups. The students were selected using snowball sampling technique. They were second

year and above level students because it was believed that they would have more diversity experience on campus than first-year students. In order to get the detailed data about the issue under study, eight teachers from different ethnic backgrounds and with at least five years of full-time work experience in BDU and three support staff that provide student services were also purposefully selected.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the teachers, staff, and 27 students. Qualitative semi-structured interview schedule was used because it allows focusing on main issues and incorporating issues which may arise during the interview. Among the 27 students, three were of mixed ethnicity. Interviews with 24 students were conducted in Amharic because they preferred Amharic to express their ideas proficiently. English was used to conduct interviews with three students who did not have sufficient Amharic proficiency.

FGD was also conducted with 29 students to obtain group perceptions and experiences on intergroup relations among students on campus. About half of the FGD participants also participated in the interview. In order to increase participants' comfort during group discussions (Morgan, 1998), they were grouped based on ethnic homogeneity. For this purpose, participants in each FGD were selected from the same ethnic background, and they knew each other before coming to participate in the group discussion. In order to achieve this, purposeful homogeneous and snowball sampling techniques were used. The first purposefully selected student nominates another student from the same ethnic background whom he/she is comfortable with to discuss the issue under study. This selection process continued until reaching a reasonable number of participants. A total of four FGDs with four different ethnic groups were conducted with between six and eight people each. The selection of ethnic groups was mainly based on the current ethnic majority-minority dichotomy, and information obtained from previous researches and through interview about groups that are often involved in ethnic conflict. Based on these criteria, the Amhara, Gambella, Oromo, and Tigre ethnic groups were selected. The discussions with Amhara, Oromo, and Tigre students were in Amharic and the discussion with Gambella students was in English[5].

The generated data were analyzed using a thematic approach. The data analysis procedure followed translating, transcribing, coding, identifying the recurrent issues that emerged from the data, and finally analyzing them thematically. In order to keep confidentiality, in direct quotations participants were addressed using abbreviations followed by numbers (e.g.,

Students = ST1, ST2…). The trustworthiness of the study was mainly enhanced through triangulation across data sources and methods.

In the coming sections, first I discuss, as revealed by my study, the factors that facilitate and impede positive intergroup relations in a university context. Likewise, efforts made by the university to improve positive intergroup relations among ethnically diverse students and their perspective on intergroup relations are also discussed.

Factors Facilitating Intergroup Relations

In this study, factors that facilitate intergroup relations include situations that contribute to meet some of the necessary conditions to enhance effective positive intergroup contacts and thereby improve positive intergroup relations. Social bond that arises because of reasons like intergroup marriage and living together is found to have contribution to positive intergroup relations.

Multi-group Membership

Marriage across ethnic lines is very common among the Ethiopian society, and it is one of the features that cement Ethiopia as a multinational state by making ethnicity less relevant. The marriage between different ethnic groups has created a large number of mixed ethnic populations. This has resulted in a mixed ethnic student groups in higher education, and this is true in the study university as well. Participant students from mixed ethnic background claim membership in more than one ethnic group. Following responses from two students make this clear:

> *It is difficult for me to identify myself in relation to a particular ethnic group. My father is Oromo and my mother is Amhara. I don't have a special affiliation to either of these ethnic groups. I just feel that I am both Amhara and Oromo. …It doesn't matter what ethnic group I belong to, because we are all Ethiopian. (ST8)*

> *I don't want to and also cannot say I belong only to this ethnic group because I am a mixed ethnic person. I grew up in the Amhara culture and my friends considered me Amhara, but the truth is I have Amhara, Sidama and Wolayita ethnic background. I can't erase this reality. So, I usually prefer to say that I am an Ethiopian without connecting myself to one ethnic group. (ST21)*

These excerpts indicate that in addition to claiming multigroup membership, mixed ethnic identity facilitated the perception and development of common identity which makes students

see one another as members of the same group (Ethiopian). Such a common ingroup identity has helped students to emphasize similarities rather than differences, and to reduce intergroup bias such as prejudice, stereotype and discrimination by developing a more inclusive group membership (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). This in turn seems to have helped them to establish a positive intergroup cooperation (Allport, 1954) and develop cross-group friendships (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012) which are necessary conditions to be met to enhance positive intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Dormitory Allocation

First-year is the most challenging year for university students with respect to different issues on campus. Among several others, the social life that requires students to share dormitories with individuals they never knew before is the main challenge. In BDU, dormitories are shared between 2 to 32 students. Students are assigned into a room based on their department at first and then alphabetically by name. This provided an environment in which students from different ethnic backgrounds live together.

When students do not choose their roommates and instead are assigned to live for a year or more with people they do not know before, one may expect more negative outcomes such as increased disagreement and tension. However, according to student service providers, there appears to be no significant difference in number of complaints and in magnitude of ethnic and religious tensions as a result of the new dormitory allocation. Students mentioned that the dormitory allocation has provided them with an opportunity to live and interact with students from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds and to develop good relationship with diverse students.

> *I am not sure about its psychological impact, but I believe that it provides more opportunities to interact [with diverse students] and closely know different cultures and languages. I think it also helps us to develop tolerance and good relationship with students from different religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. (ST13)*

> *It is good to get rooms based on department and alphabet. For me, one of the good experiences of campus life is sharing rooms and living with people from different ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds. It provides us with a very good opportunity to know about others' cultures and make friends with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. You don't get this chance in other places. (ST21)*

These excerpts indicate that the dormitory allocation strategy created a contact situation that provided students with an opportunity to know more about and establish friendship with members of other groups. Having roommates from different ethnic groups has helped students to have more intergroup contact that helps to reduce prejudice. This idea is consistent with contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). This shows that in addition to its main objective, which is solving some administrative (room key) and academic (group work and study) related problems, the dormitory allocation strategy seems to provide opportunities for students to develop positive intergroup attitudes and cross-group friendship which is essential for positive intergroup relations (Pettigrew, 1998).

Factors Impeding Intergroup Relations

Factors that impede intergroup relations include situations or issues that in one way or another have negative influences on attaining one of the necessary conditions to enhance effective positive intergroup contact and thereby improve positive intergroup relations. Government system, policy and strategy which are related to ethnic federalism, political membership, languages and student placement are found to have a negative effect on the intergroup relations.

Language and Ethnicity Based Friendship

BDU students live on campus, share dormitories, socialize and attend classes with students from different ethnic backgrounds. This provides them with many opportunities for developing cross-ethnic friendships and positive intergroup relations. However, in the FGDs, students noted the growing tendency of ethnicity-based friendship. There are two reasons for the increased ethnic preference in close friendship selection. The first reason that students mentioned is the direct and indirect influence of the administrative and political system. Students believed that the way ethnic federal system has been implemented seems to have increased ethnonational sentiment and differences among different ethnic groups.

Studies and reports also indicate that the ethnicity-based federal system increased differences among ethnic groups in Ethiopia (International Crisis Group, 2009), and facilitated division along ethnic lines (Engedayehu, 1993). This appears to have contributed to the development of what is described in the literature as key elements of close friendship such as self-disclosure, loyalty, trust, and emotional support (Way, Gingold, Rotenerg, & Kuriakose, 2005) within one's own ethnic group. Moreover, the ruling party's emphasis on historic interethnic grievances for its political purpose as well as opposition parties' emphasis

on the current unfair ethnic power dynamics in the government have influenced people's attitude toward some ethnic groups. In the context of campus climate, such issues seem to have negatively influenced students' ethnic preference in selecting close friends. This affects cross-group friendship which in turn facilitates equal group status, intergroup cooperation and common goal (Pettigrew, 1998).

The second reason for the increased ethnic preference in close friendship selection is related to language. Amharic is the working language of the country and it is adopted as a language of countrywide communication. Although it is taught as a subject in primary and secondary education, there are university students who have little or insufficient Amharic language skills. This finding concurs with a study that shows problems of communicating using the Amharic language among students in Hawassa University, another public university in Ethiopia (Semela, 2012). The potential reason for insufficient proficiency in Amharic language is related to students' lack of interest to learn the language in school. The lack of interest is associated with students' perception about Amharic only as a language of Amharas, not as the working language of the federal state and the language of countrywide communication. Their attitude towards Amharic as a language of acculturation, assimilation and dominance also negatively influenced their interest to learn Amharic. Study also indicates that lack of enough attention to Amharic in schools, and teachers' lack of competence in teaching Amharic as a second language affect students' proficiency in the language (Benson, Heugh, Bogale, & Mekonnen, 2012).

Students do not use English to communicate with each other though it is taught as a subject since primary education and is used as a medium of instruction since secondary education. One of the main reasons for this is that they have low English proficiency. Only some students from Gambella, Somali and Benshangul-Gumuz use English to communicate with students from other ethnic groups because the former ones do not speak Amharic or relatively they are more proficient in English than in Amharic. These students described the difficulty to interact with most students. One of them said:

I do not speak Amharic. So, I use my language [Nuer language] to communicate with students from my ethnic group, and English to communicate with other students. As you know, most students use Amharic, not English, to communicate with each other. So, it is a

big challenge for us to communicate, discuss and socialize with most students in the university and also with people outside the university. (ST4)

The above discussion indicates that for different reasons some groups of students have low or insufficient Amharic proficiency, and most students have low English proficiency, and this brings the language policy at the center of communication problems among people from different ethnic backgrounds. Instead of developing and sustaining common language(s), "the current language policy appears to produce citizens that will find it hard to communicate with each other" (Negash, 2006, p. 50). Communication problem affects contacts between different groups which is the backbone of Allport's intergroup contact theory.

The importance of a common language in friendship is unarguable, because it is difficult to establish friendship if people are not able to communicate and understand each other because of language barrier. Although Amharic is a lingua franca for most Ethiopians, as indicated above, there are students who have difficulty in having a long discussion with students outside their own linguistic or ethnic group. These students tend to prefer discussing and making friends with individuals who speak the same language. In most cases, these individuals are from one's own ethnic group because in Ethiopia there is high congruence between ethnicity and language, and most, if not all, ethnic groups have distinct languages and/or dialects (Young, 1997). In such cases, language becomes one of the main reasons for making close same-ethnic friendship. The growing tendency of ethnicity-based friendship decreases intergroup contact and opportunities for establishing cross-group friendships which are important to reduce prejudice and improve positive intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998).

Prejudice, Stereotypes and Ethnocentrism

In the FGDs, students noted that their preconceived judgments about outgroups sometimes negatively influenced the relationship between them and outgroup members, mainly during the first-year. Students' prejudicial and stereotypical attitudes are often reflected during tense debates between members of different groups and in graffiti on classroom and toilet walls. Most derogatory graffiti targeted different ethnic and religious groups and their motives are contempt, hatred, hostility and political rivalry. In the FGDs, students referred to graffiti to show the negative attitude of certain ethnic groups toward another group. Though there are several stereotypes and prejudices mentioned by students, in order to illustrate their impact on intergroup relations, I took only social prejudices that focus

on Amhara ethnic group. The most common ones include considering Amharas as magicians and evil-eyed.

> *When I told my families and relatives that I am placed in Bahir Dar University, one of my relatives advised me to take care of myself from Gojjames*[6] *because they have evil eyes. Since I also heard about it through some music and from friends in high school, I didn't argue. But, I asked him what it exactly meant and how I was supposed to know them. He did not have the answers but continued to advise me. Even after I came here, some students told me about it, but practically, I live with them and I haven't seen anything like that in the last two years. (ST17)*

> *I have heard bad things about the Amharas. For example, some people say that they are evil-eyed and magicians. Although I lived with some Amharas before I came here, I was a little bit worried when I thought that I am going to the place where all what has been said about the Amhara happens. ...Since I have this thing in my mind, in the first-year first semester, I was suspicious and not very close to Amhara students mainly with those who came from rural places. But later on, I realized that there is nothing like that and now I have some good friends from Amhara. (ST2)*

Students that came with such preconceived judgments were reluctant to establish friendship with Amharas who are considered evil-eyed. They were not free to share materials with Amharas fearing the so-called magic that allegedly causes academic failure and health problem. Although these students had the experience of attending the same school with some Amhara students, the information they got from different sources make them believe that the evil-eyed ones are found in Gojjam.

Although such kinds of prejudices and stereotypes decrease when students start to live and spend more time together, they are common among first-year students and they negatively influence intergroup contacts and relations. This strengthens the argument that intergroup contact influences prejudice and likewise prejudice influences intergroup contacts and intergroup relations, though the former has more impact than vice versa (Schofield, Hausmann, Ye, & Woods, 2010).

Ethnocentrism is a universal phenomenon which is not limited to certain groups or cultures (Lewis, 1985). This implies that every person is ethnocentric to some degree (Triandis, 1994). Yet, in this study, students' ethnocentric behavior and attitude toward

outgroup members went to the extent of affecting their intergroup relation. Students stated that when they discuss issues related to ethnicity and religion, ethnic majority students tend to evaluate others' culture in terms of their own culture. This is because ethnic groups which are culturally, numerically and politically dominant tend to believe and show they are better than others. Study also indicates that "attitudinally, ethnocentric groups see themselves as strong and superior, while viewing outgroups as inferior and weak" (Neuliep, Chaudoir, & McCroskey, 2001, p. 138). Because of this, usually members of ethnic groups who are considered inferior to others decrease or avoid discussing ethnic issues with outgroup members, and this in turn decreases intergroup contact and thereby affects positive intergroup relations on campus. Among some ethnic groups, ethnocentric attitude and behavior sometimes even becomes one of the main reasons for interethnic conflict.

Equal group status within the situation and cross-group friendship are some of the main conditions that need to be met in order to facilitate positive intergroup contact and intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Yet, students' ethnocentric, stereotypical and prejudicial attitude and behavior challenge the equal status of different ethnic groups and make cross-group friendship difficult, and this mostly impedes the intergroup relation among students.

Political Party Membership

In Ethiopia, most political parties are organized along ethnic lines. Students and teachers stated that most students in BDU are members of the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) which is the ruling political coalition in Ethiopia. According to students, the main reason for joining the ruling party is related to future job opportunity. One of the unwritten requirements for ruling party membership seems to be identifying or affiliating oneself with an ethnic group because all major and allied political parties of EPRDF are ethnicity-based. Mixed ethnic students stated that they have difficulties in choosing one of the ethnicity-based political parties because they belong to more than one ethnic group.

> *I became a member of EPRDF last year, but it was not easy for me to choose between ANDM and OPDO[7]. I chose ANDM because most of my friends are members of this party. If it was possible to be a member of EPRDF without associating myself to an ethnic group, I would choose that. Before I became a member [of ANDM], some students considered me Oromo and some others considered me Amhara, but after I became a*

*member, Oromo students felt that I changed my ethnic identity and our relationship is not
as good as it once was. (ST24)*

This indicates that the ethnicity-based political party membership dismantles individuals'
mixed ethnic background and obliges them to identify themselves as members of a certain
ethnic group. This left mixed ethnic students without alternatives but to choose one ethnic
group to which they have more affiliation for various reasons. Teachers also noted that ethnic
affiliated political membership increases ethnic differences and segregation along ethnic
lines. They also stated that such membership creates competition rather than cooperation
among students from different ethnic backgrounds. This shows that the ethnicity-based
political party membership decreases intergroup contact and affects intergroup cooperation
which is one of basic conditions that need to be met to enhance positive intergroup relations
(Allport, 1954).

Ethnic Composition

Similar to other public universities, BDU has students from different ethnic groups that
come from different parts of the country. However, participants mentioned that there is a
numerical dominance of the Amhara ethnic group in three academic years 2009/10 –
2011/12. The data from BDU database indicate that in the three academic years, BDU has
61% students from Amhara region[8]. The population and housing census indicates that 91.5%
of the people in Amhara region belong to the Amhara ethnic group (Central Statistical
Agency, 2008). Thus, the data from BDU database and statistical report of the 2007
population and housing census illustrated and corroborated the numerical dominance of the
Amhara in BDU.

The numerical dominance of one ethnic group on campus decreases opportunities to meet
and interact with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds and establish cross-group
friendships. This somehow affects the intergroup contact, because the impact of contact
varies depending on the numerical composition of the groups involved (Hayes, McAllister, &
Dowds, 2007). Moreover, because of the numerical dominance of an ethnic group from the
region where the university is geographically located, students from some ethnic groups have
low sense of belonging. This somehow created a feeling of "their" and "our" university and
negatively affected intergroup cooperation that would have facilitated intergroup relations
(Allport, 1954).

Efforts by the University to Improve Positive Intergroup Relations

Students generally seem to have positive perception of diversity and attitude toward outgroups and developing positive intergroup relations. This is consistent with Semela's (2012) finding that students have positive attitude toward making friends, living and working with ethnic outgroups. One student stated that "*wherever we go, we live and work with diverse people. This is inevitable. So, we need to develop positive relationship with people from different ethnic groups*" (ST5). Students seem to understand that diversity is a reality, not a passing fad, and they want to live in harmony with others both inside and outside the university. They are ashamed of and against the continuing ethnic rivalry, and want to bring a fundamental change in the socioeconomic structure which has been the case since the imperial government (Balsvik, 2007). However, as discussed in the above sections, there are different historical and current situations that challenge their positive attitude towards outgroups and affect their need to develop positive intergroup relations. In such a context, institutional support becomes very important to strengthen students' positive attitude towards outgroups and facilitate positive intergroup relations.

Allport (1954) identified that institutional support is one of the necessary conditions to enhance positive intergroup relations. Literature proposes different strategies and programs that institutions can implement to facilitate positive intergroup relations on campus. These include diversity-related curricular and extracurricular programs and activities. However, there is no complete and proved guideline or recipe available to adopt because this is highly contextual. So, each university needs first to identify the challenges and opportunities, and then adopt or develop strategies that take its context into consideration.

In its five-year strategic plan (2011/2012-2015/2016), BDU has identified 'promoting diversity' as one of its seven core values that significantly contribute to achieving its mission and vision (BDU, 2011). In relation to promoting diversity, the strategic plan has aimed at developing a system that enables students, teachers and staff members respect and promote diversity by organizing different programs and activities such as courses, trainings, seminars, and discussions. This is as per the expectation that implementation and follow up of these programs and activities could create a positive campus environment that facilitates positive intergroup relations. Although some of these programs and activities were planned to be implemented in the first-year of the strategic plan (2011/2012), during the data collection period none of them was put into action.

The event that students and teachers repeatedly mentioned in relation to enhancing positive intergroup relation is the Literature Night which is organized by the cultural center of the University. The music, literature and other activities of the center is organized by volunteer students. These activities seem to help students develop sense of equal status and opportunities to interact and develop cross-ethnic friendship. Despite its significant contribution to create positive campus environment and intergroup relations, the center has no financial support from the university.

> *The cultural center is doing a great job more than what the university expects. However, it cannot continue like this, because it has almost no support from the university. ... Unless the university seriously considers its support and attitude toward the center, I fear that the day that the university will miss all the good works of the cultural center is not far. (ST5)*

Lack of institutional support to different programs and activities that contribute to promote diversity and enhance positive intergroup relations shows the difference between what the university wants to do as indicated in the strategic plan and what it is actually doing. This in turn gives a strong base to argue that promoting intergroup relations is not actually a priority for the university management.

So far, the institutional support to the existing diversity-related activities is not encouraging, and the implementation of programs and activities according to the strategic plan is lagging behind the schedule. Students and teachers noted that this is because of lack of confidence and support from managers to deal with diversity-related issues. It is believed that the university management has failed to support programs and activities that enhance positive campus climate and intergroup relations because of two main reasons. First, managers seem to lack diversity management skills. Second, managers lack confidence to implement and support initiatives that promote diversity because of fear of politicization of diversity-related issues. Moreover, study indicates that any initiative that targets promoting and managing diversity cannot be achieved without the strong support and commitment of higher officials of an institution (Norris, 2000). In BDU, lack of implementing and supporting different diversity-related curricular and extracurricular programs and activities is believed to be one of the factors that have contributed to the deteriorating intergroup relations among students.

Conclusion

The primary focuses of this paper were exploring factors that facilitate and impede positive intergroup relations and examining efforts made to improve positive intergroup relations among ethnically diverse university students. The result identifies that multigroup membership which results from the marriage between different ethnic groups, and dormitory allocation based on students' department and alphabet contributed to creating opportunities for intergroup contact and developing positive intergroup relations among students. The result also provides important insights about factors that impede positive intergroup relations among ethnically diverse students. These factors include prejudice, stereotypes and ethnocentrism, language and ethnicity-based friendship, political party membership, and ethnic composition.

BDU recognizes the value of diversity and considers promoting diversity as one of the core values to achieve its mission and vision. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition to promote diversity and enhance positive intergroup relations. Practically, there is lack of support from the university management to different diversity-related programs and activities that promote diversity. This affects strengthening students' general positive attitude towards outgroups which in turn facilitates positive intergroup relations. The main reasons for the lack of support from the university management are related to managers' lack of confidence and diversity management skills.

Despite the presence of all odds, students want to promote unity and live in harmony. Such expectation as expressed by students needs to be promoted through appropriate national policies and strategies as well as institutional or local programs and strategies that promote diversity and enhance positive intergroup relations.

Notes

[1] "Indigenous ethnic diversity" refers to ethnic diversity resulted from native population or ethnic groups which are indigenous to a country.

[2] Since the 2009/2010 academic year, the number of students from the region where BDU is geographically located highly increased. This may be because the Ministry of Education has used criteria which are not included in the guideline for student placement.

[3] Gambella is not actually an ethnic group. It is a region that constitutes different ethnic groups such as Nuer and Agnuak. However, the ethnic groups from this region were generally referred to as "Gambella" by participants including students from the ethnic groups found in Gambella.

[4] The study does not focus on the intergroup relation between each ethnic group, i.e. between Amhara and Oromo, Gambella and Somali, etc. It rather focuses on the intergroup relations between all ethnic groups in general.

[5] Gambella students preferred English as a medium of communication because they do not speak Amharic or they are relatively more proficient in English than in Amharic.

[6] Gojjame refers to people who live in the former Gojjam province which is now part of the Amhara National Regional State. BDU is geographically located in the former Gojjam province.

[7] Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) and Oromo People Democratic Organization (OPDO).

[8] Next to Amhara region, most students (13%) came from Addis Ababa city administration where Amhara is the dominant ethnic group as compared to others.

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