

## CONFERENCE REPORT

### FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT

*Reflections on the International Debate held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,  
13-15 May 2009*

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Addis Ababa, which means ‘New Flower’ in Amharic, is the capital of Ethiopia and its largest city. It is also the political and cultural heart of the state. The country’s ethnic and cultural diversity has given rise to many unique, dynamic visual traditions, considering that 80 different languages and dialects are spoken there. Addis Ababa hosted the *First International Conference on Educational Research for Development*, from 13 to 15 May 2009, organised by the College of Education, University of Addis Ababa (AAU).

The AAU is the oldest and most important university in Ethiopia. The AAU College of Education is indeed the oldest of all the education faculties in the country and is located on the Main Campus of the University. The overall aim of the College of Education is to foster teaching, research, testing, training and consultancy services in education and related fields. Almost all the departments offer undergraduate degree programmes and postgraduate MA/MSc/MEd programmes and some seven run PhD programmes. The College also publishes a biannual journal, the *Journal of Education for Development*.

The conference was held at the Akaki Campus. Akaki is an industrial suburb of Addis Ababa; the campus being about 20 km from the city centre, but the conference Organisation guaranteed efficient transport for all the participants during the three days of the meeting. The aim of the conference was to generate a global discussion forum on the roles of research in policy and improving practice, and to create new networks and research consortia. The language of the conference was English. The conference organising committee provided facilities for those presenting papers in terms of laptop computers for PowerPoint presentations, a LCD projector and so on.

This first international conference of the College of Education was organised thanks to the efforts of Professor Tirusew Teferra, dean of the College of Education, who succeeded in setting up a large international network.

There were 233 participants with different profiles: researchers from prestigious universities, members of international research associations, partners of the College of Education in Addis Ababa, scholars from the Ethiopian Diaspora, representatives of education-affiliated non-governmental organisations, presidents and delegates of Ethiopian Higher Education Institutes, academic staff from Addis Ababa University and doctoral students. The majority of the international delegates came from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, some came from other parts of United Kingdom; there were also people from Scotland, Finland, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, the United State of America, Canada, Tanzania, India, and Iran. The contributions covered a wide range of topics and issues necessary to an understanding of the nature and role of education and research including empirical studies carried out in a wide range of contexts involving diverse cultures and education systems (both from the developed and developing world). Diverse methodological approaches, perspectives and assumptions were represented. There were 68 paper presentations on interdisciplinary perspectives regarding: educational research paradigms, higher education, innovation and challenges, teacher education, early child and special needs education, gender, adult and environmental education. The conference was composed of keynote addresses, parallel workshops, and a mix of plenary and parallel sessions, paper presentations and poster presentation sessions.

The keynotes speeches (some sponsored by the British Educational Research Association and by the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain) addressed the following areas: 21<sup>st</sup> century methodological paradigms in educational research, postgraduate research, teaching and learning links, educational research for development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, David Bridges (Professor Emeritus, University of East Anglia; Emeritus Fellow, St. Edmund's College, Cambridge) observed that the rapid growth of higher education in Ethiopia and other parts of the world needs to be accompanied by a parallel expansion in research and questioned whether all universities and staff should be engaged in research. He argued that requiring all staff to engage in research may not be desirable and realistic, and therefore proposed that the vitality of teaching in higher education be supported by staff who are engaged in other scholarly activities or professions or business and not just research work. Professor Bridges outlined the conditions required for a conducive research culture. He underlined the need for university faculties of education to engage in research at different levels (international, national and local) and argued that it is in the interest of society for researchers to produce different kinds of research (illuminative, policy directing, policy implementation, evaluative and critical). Teshome Wagaw (Professor Emeritus of Higher Education; Emeritus Professor of

African and Afro-American Studies, University of Michigan), drawing on his experience, explained the kinds of challenges and barriers faced by those wishing to conduct research in Ethiopia and argued that it takes great professional commitment and determination to successfully conduct research. Professor Morwenna Griffiths (Moray House School of Education, Edinburgh University) focused on using narratives in educational research. She argued that the usual emphasis on the need for generalisable and universal knowledge is wrong. She also argued against the claim that personal narratives do not lead to trustworthy knowledge and she made a case for context-specific knowledge. Professor Samuel L. Odom (Director, FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina) showed that in the United States research questions and standards for research in education have changed over the last decade. He explained that there has been a tendency for the focus of research questions to shift from efficacy to implementation. Professor John Furlong (University of Oxford; President of BERA 2003-2005) stressed that the quality of the teaching staff represents the single, most important factor in improving education and, therefore, teachers have to come top on the quality agenda. He argued that a key part of professional education must take place in the context of the classroom itself.

The topics covered in panel discussions were: innovative approaches to educational research, methods of monitoring school performance, models and processes of self-assessment, the impact of education MDGs in Africa, the role of new technologies in enhancing teacher education and lifelong learning, intercultural trans-disciplinary models of educational research, the contribution of qualitative research to policy making, planning and implementation, contextualising knowledge, knowledge acquisition vs. knowledge application, the role of evaluation in enhancing student's results, evidence-based educational planning, ethical issues in educational research, the importance of research by teachers for policy-making, the role of educational research in improving pedagogy, an indigenous philosophy of education, action research, ethnographic research and education policy, the influence of neo-liberal thinking on education and traditional vs. newer forms of ethnography.

A networking session was organised during the last day of the Conference. The discussants were the deans of Education Faculties of Dilla, Bahir Dar, Haramaya, Arba Minch and Mekele Universities. The convener, Professor Tirusew Teferra, invited the participants to create new networks and research consortia. Representatives from the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Kiel contributed different suggestions. Giovanni Pampanini from Italy, member of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies, was asked to communicate the results of the conference to the World Council in order to guarantee the widest possible circulation. Thanks to the organising committee which pre-arranged a

cultural evening, including traditional Ethiopian music and food, and a visit to Ethiopian schools and historical sites, the international participants had the opportunity to meet educational researchers in Ethiopia and to participate in the rich cultural life of Addis Ababa. In this city, I noted that one says *hello* by shaking hands and touching shoulders. I found this an enriching experience for my own field of psycho-motion.

This conference facilitated Ethiopia's entrance into the field of international education research and, at the same time, encouraged the international teaching community to get to know this fascinating African country.