

**Interethnic Relations among Students at  
Selected Universities in Ethiopia: *The  
Urgent Need for Institutional Unity in  
Diversity Policy at Debre Berhan  
University***

**Policy Brief**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of Ethiopia is reflected in its public universities. Theoretically, this diversity should present a chance to promote intercultural understanding and national cohesion. However, actual studies at Debre Berhan, Hawassa, and Haramaya Universities show a concerning discrepancy between the lived realities of interethnic student relations and the promise of diversity. Ethnic clustering, mistrust, identity-based conflicts, and a lack of cross-cultural interaction are becoming more prevalent in student life despite rhetoric from the constitution and education that encourages inclusivity.

The results highlight the necessity of prompt institutional action. As a pilot project that may eventually be expanded nationally, this policy brief suggests that Debre Berhan University (DBU) immediately establish an Institutional Unity in Diversity Policy. The administrative, academic, and social fabric of the institution should incorporate intercultural education, interethnic discussion, peace-building, and structural inclusion. In order to ensure that campuses become places of learning not only in knowledge but also in cohabitation and citizenship, universities must move from passive tolerance to active integration.

**INTRODUCTION**

Since 1995, Ethiopia, which is home to more than 80 ethnic groups, has accepted ethnic federalism, allowing its varied inhabitants to enjoy cultural and linguistic rights. However, this ethnic based model has been mostly criticized of being source of increased ethnic polarization, sporadic conflict, and weak national cohesion, despite its intended goal of managing diversity and empowering local identities. Ethiopian universities are increasingly reflecting these larger national processes.

In addition to being hubs for academic achievement, higher education institutions serve as social laboratories where young people from all over the nation first come into contact with "the other." Universities should ideally support the development of inclusive citizenship, bridge-building, and understanding between people. Rather, ethnicity is now a defining characteristic of social interaction, group identity, and even

political mobilization in the country in general and higher education institutions in particular.

Situated in a historically known area of Ethiopia, Debre Berhan University is in a unique position to take the lead in tackling this issue. Therefore, this policy brief presents a strong argument for why and how DBU can create and execute an all-encompassing Unity in Diversity Policy.

### **Research Approach and Methodology**

This policy brief is based on qualitative research that was carried out at three significant public universities—Debre Berhan, Hawassa, and Haramaya—between 2018 and 2019. The study made use of:

- Comprehensive interviews with leaders of student unions, academia, administrators, and students.
- Concentrate on group conversations with various scholarly and cultural groupings.
- Observational data from student associations, classroom participation, dorms, and cafeterias.
- Examining student union guidelines, rules and regulations, disciplinary records, and university procedures.

Purposive and snowball sampling was used

to record the experiences of students of various ethnic groups. The study placed a high priority on documenting lived experiences and comprehending the structural and discursive factors that underlie ethnic separation.

Understanding the underlying structural and discursive drivers of ethnic divide and documenting lived experiences were the research's top priorities, and sampling was deliberate and snowball-based to collect the experiences of students.

### **Key Research Findings**

#### **Ethnic Grouping and Social Segregation:**

Students tend to socialize primarily along ethnic lines, creating exclusive networks in dining halls, academic group work, and dorms. This ethnic affiliation limits exposure to diverse perspectives and undermines intercultural competence.

#### **Weak Culture of Constructive Dialogue:**

Students tend to avoid controversial but important topics, like Ethiopian history, federalism, or national identity, because they lack the necessary training and safe spaces to engage in respectful, critical, and transformative dialogue.

#### **Politicization and Historical Grievances:**

Disagreements over historical narratives, regional inequalities, and identity politics engender mistrust and resentment. Ethnic-based political discourse outside university walls is replicated within, frequently without adequate historical literacy or balanced perspectives.

**Governance of Students by Ethnicity:** In student organizations and clubs, leadership positions are frequently disputed based on ethnicity. Minority students are marginalized and democratic ideals are undermined when candidates are evaluated based on perceived ethnic allegiance rather than qualifications or vision.

**Ethnic Polarization Driven by the Media:** Social media increases ethnic grudges and disseminates misinformation, which heightens tensions. The majority of pupils are not media literate enough to evaluate contentious issues critically.

**Inadequate Institutions:** Institutional tools for fostering inclusivity and resolving disputes are lacking. Staff and students at universities are not routinely trained in inclusive governance, diversity management, or conflict resolution.

### Policy Implications

The results imply that national politics, institutional gaps, and cultural silences shape interethnic tensions, which are neither isolated nor coincidental. These developments pose a threat to both the national objective of creating an inclusive nation and the social mission of universities if they are not addressed.

By putting in place a Unity in Diversity Policy, DBU can:

- Lessen ethnic based tensions on campus

- Enhance students' academic achievement and psychosocial well-being;
- Foster respect for one another and national unity; and
- Equip graduates to contribute positively to a plural society.

### Policy Recommendations

#### Institutionalize Dialogue and Intercultural Learning

- Establish a **Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Peace-building (CIDP)** at DBU
- Organize regular forums, town halls, and peer-facilitated dialogues on identity, history, and citizenship

#### Integrate Peace and Diversity Education into the Curriculum

- Develop mandatory general education courses on:
  - Multiculturalism
  - Conflict resolution
  - Youth and peace building
  - Media literacy and critical thinking
- Encourage interdisciplinary learning and values-based education

#### Promote Inclusive Extracurricular Activities

- Create multicultural clubs and interethnic debate teams
- Host annual **Unity Weeks** featuring cultural exhibitions, storytelling, and sports
- Sponsor collaborative community service projects

#### Democratize Student Governance

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- Enforce codes of conduct that prohibit ethnic-based campaigning
- Implement quotas or inclusion mechanisms for marginalized students in leadership roles
- Provide training on inclusive leadership and democratic representation

### **Strengthen Conflict Prevention and Response Systems**

- Train selected students as peer mediators
- Establish early warning systems
- Create a student ombudsperson's office to handle grievances

### **Audit and Improve Institutional Services**

- Conduct regular equity audits of campus facilities, security, food services, and academic support
- Ensure fair representation of ethnic groups in hiring and staff promotion

### **Support Vulnerable and Minority Students**

- Develop special initiatives for women, students with disabilities, and underrepresented ethnic groups
- Create scholarships and mentorship programs for marginalized students

### **Offer Diversity Leadership Certification**

- Introduce a **Certificate in Intercultural Leadership and Civic Engagement**
- Recognize student peace builders and diversity advocates at graduation ceremonies

### **Build Strategic Partnerships**

- Collaborate with NGOs, CSOs, and international organizations.
- Seek technical and financial assistance for curriculum design and capacity building
- Network with other universities for best practices in inclusive education.

## **Conclusion**

Debre Berhan University must become more than a center of academic instruction—it must be a builder of peace, citizenship, and national integration. The adoption of an **Institutional Unity in Diversity Policy** is not just a strategic imperative; it is a moral responsibility.

This policy brief calls upon the university leadership, faculty, students, and national stakeholders to work together in transforming DBU into a model institution for interethnic harmony. By taking a proactive, comprehensive, and inclusive approach, DBU can play a pioneering role in reshaping higher education as a space for peaceful coexistence, responsible citizenship, and resilient democracy.

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