

Education in Ethiopia

In the fourth in a series of articles, **Dr Jenny Search** reports on her continuing two-year voluntary service overseas placement at Debu University in Ethiopia



I AM EMPLOYED by Debu University as a biology instructor, but as a VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) volunteer we are encouraged to become involved in other issues such as HIV/AIDS awareness and gender issues. As a member of the fairer sex myself I decided to try and find out about the issues facing females in Ethiopia.

From the start, life is harder for girls. Boys are given preferential feeding from an early age. Females in a family are expected to do all the cooking and cleaning, as well as chores such as gathering firewood and collecting water. The male

members of the family get to sit around and drink coffee served to them by girls. If the girls in a family are lucky enough to be allowed to go to school then they are likely to perform less well than the boys as they have less time to study outside of school. Yet according to VSO, the education of girls is one of the most effective means of reducing poverty and empowering women. Things are very slowly beginning to change as the government is making an effort to encourage more female students into schools and universities. This effort is supported by the International Development Goals launched by the UN five

years ago. These goals include access to basic education for all by 2015 and to have equal numbers of males and females in schools by 2005. Although I recently read the British government doubts the latter target will be reached on time (1).

Data from the period 1992-1997 show that in Ethiopia, the female share of tertiary education enrolment is about 20% but in 1999 only 14% of the graduates were women (2). The same study also showed that only 6% of teachers in tertiary education were female (compared to 10% in secondary education). It is difficult to get reliable statistics, but from my

experience in Debu University, women are hugely underrepresented. In the faculty of Natural Sciences there are no Ethiopian female lecturers and only 4 female expatriate lecturers consisting of three ladies from India and myself. As for the students, the percentage of girls is; in biology 31%, statistics 19%, chemistry 12%, maths 6% and in physics 0%! The Ethiopian government is using positive discrimination as one way of increasing University admissions of female students. Female students are allowed to enter with lower grades from school, however once on campus they do not have the support required to pass the

Far left: 'Women's assertiveness training workshop'. All the freshman female students attended

Below: Women at the market in a small village in Southern Ethiopia.

Top right: Woman collecting water from a communal standpipe

Bottom right: A small girl chewing sugar cane while carrying her load



Picture by kind courtesy of Keith Holmes



Picture by kind courtesy of Mark Biver



Picture by kind courtesy of Keith Holmes

References

- 1. *The Guardian Weekly* 19 February 2004, Vol 170 No 9
- 2. The progress of nations. UNICEF 1994

Further Information

- www.neal-jenny.info
- www.vso.org.uk.
- The Faculty of Natural Sciences at Debu University: <http://home.no/dufns>

courses and often drop out at the end of the first year. Data from the women's affairs office for the Academic Year 2001/2002 show that the attrition rate for all female students in the University was 42%. Unfortunately the highest attrition rate was in the sciences. 70% of female students enrolled into the Faculty of Natural Sciences dropped out after the first semester.

In Debu University the women's affairs office was established to try and tackle some of the issues faced by the female students. At the beginning of the academic year the new female students were given a "buddy" — a girl

from the year above who showed them around, took them to the dining hall etc. There was also a training day organised where the new female students were given advice about being assertive without being aggressive. Students from the year above shared some of their experiences in the form of stories and poems. Various other strategies are being implemented, including giving the girls their own study space — the library is overcrowded and there is no male chivalry when it comes to finding seats! Tutorials are also given to female students in subjects in which they tend to perform poorly, such as maths. So a

start is being made, but if I think of the number of females in high-ranking positions in British universities, Ethiopia is not the only country with some work to do.

Last year I wrote a small proposal with a colleague which was accepted by the university to test the bacteriological quality of the drinking water in Awassa. The money was made available to us to buy the chemicals we need (mostly different kinds of media) but the actual purchasing process is far from simple. The standard procedure is to put out a tender where at least three different companies have to

supply quotes for all the chemicals/equipment needed and then the best offer is taken up. However this process usually takes at least a year with all the paperwork involved. To try and speed things up the university allowed us to use a cash system where we could buy the chemicals directly from the suppliers via a purchasing committee. This is where we faced problems. Number one, there are very few suppliers in Ethiopia and they do not carry much stock and usually only order large quantities of specific items. Secondly the purchasing committee have to make a special trip to Addis Ababa and are not necessarily familiar with the chemicals ordered. This means if the exact chemical specified on the order is not available then they cannot substitute it for an alternative chemical/media which could still be used.

After two trips where the committee came back empty handed I started to lose hope that the project would even be started before I'm due to leave. I ended up going to Addis Ababa myself (a 6 hour bus journey which is not much fun) and traipsing around as many suppliers as I could find.

I found one place with 3 jars of eosin methylene blue (EMB) agar (in the back of a cupboard) and other suppliers assured me they could order small quantities of nutrient and other agars in as little as 6-8 weeks.

The University has purchased the EMB agar we now just have to acquire it from the store. I won't be holding my breath but hopefully this means we can make a start in the near future!

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