

Education in Ethiopia

In the seventh and final article in her series, **Dr Jenny Search** reports on her continuing two-year voluntary service overseas placement at Debu University in Ethiopia

in Ethiopia



I AM LEAVING. I have taught my last lecture, my last lab, set and marked my last exam and marked my last lab reports. While I've been here

I've taught over 700 students from first year to fourth year. The class sizes have ranged from 28 to over 200 students. I have taught labs to 90 students at a time in rushed 90 minute slots and have had relaxed 3 hour practical sessions with final year biology students. The last few weeks have been quite emotional, attending farewell parties and wondering when I will next see these people again.

It's definitely a time for reflection as I think about all I have learned during my time here. The media portrays a very unbalanced view of Ethiopia. Like most people in Europe, I associated Ethiopia with famines and thought it would look like a desert. The first thing that struck me when I arrived was how lush and green some parts of the country are, especially in the south where I was living. The diversity across the country is also remarkable. There are eighty-three languages and two hundred dialects spoken in Ethiopia. The country is very mountainous, the highest point is higher than 4400 m, even where I was in Awassa in

the Rift Valley, at 1700 m we were higher than the highest point in the UK!

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world with 85% of the population reliant on subsistence farming. There are many problems facing education in the country, especially in rural areas (See Table 1) and Ethiopia, like much of Sub-Saharan Africa, is severely affected by HIV/AIDS.

The total number of people living with HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa is 28.1 million, accounting for more than 70% of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS worldwide (1). In 2000 it was estimated that 3 million adults and children

in Ethiopia were living with HIV/AIDS (See Table 2 for some statistics). At a household level, HIV is having a real impact on wealth. Illnesses related to HIV/AIDS exacerbate this by reducing time spent working (including teaching) and increasing the number of hospital beds occupied by patients with AIDS-related illnesses.

VSO is trying to tackle some of these problems by mainstreaming HIV and AIDS into every placement. This means that I was expected to include some activities that addressed some of the problems of the epidemic. The idea of mainstreaming is that these activities should be part

Far left: Debu University Main Campus - The main method of transport to the campus is bicycle

Left: The leaving party arranged for me by the final year students of the applied biology department. I will never forget them

Right: Me and Colleagues - me wearing traditional Ethiopian dress



Table 1. Problems Facing Schools in Ethiopia

Problem	Comments
Low enrolment rates	due to negative attitude to education; nomadic migration of families; distance from nearest school
High drop out rates	Children are needed for domestic tasks; early marriage; abduction of girls for marriage; inadequate sanitation; teacher/pupil relations
Lack of adequately trained teachers	
High turnover of teachers in rural areas	Teachers prefer to work in urban areas
Lack of female teachers	
Lack of infrastructure	Inadequate buildings; insufficient furniture; inadequate or no water; inadequate or no sanitation
Lack of teaching materials and textbooks	In general and in local languages

Table 2. Summary of statistics available from the UN (2000) regarding prevalence rates of HIV in Ethiopia

Year	Site	People tested	HIV Prevalence
1997	Addis Abeba	Antenatal attendees	18%
1993	10 sites outside Addis Abeba	Antenatal attendees	4%
1990	Addis Abeba	Sex workers	54%
1998	22 sites outside Addis Abeba	Sex workers	5-38%

of the normal working day rather than one-off events that may not be repeated. For example, during an immunology course we took the students to the regional health bureau to demonstrate how the ELISA test for HIV is performed. This test is routinely performed on antenatal clinic attendees at the major hospitals and clinics in the region. So not only did the students see how an ELISA was performed they gained information about HIV prevalence in the area that they live in. Next semester some of the senior student projects involve surveying students to find out about

their attitudes and sexual behaviours relating to HIV and AIDS.

Despite these problems, the country is developing fast and money seems to be being pumped in from many sources. Even in the two years I have been here, new housing developments, factories, shops and hotels have sprung up all over the place.

The University was just a couple of buildings when I arrived and taught some of the first ever classes on the new campus. Now it is a sprawling campus with flowers everywhere and thousands of students. The first graduations from the Faculty of Natural

Sciences will take place this summer and I am sorry I will miss them.

As I have developed my skills and knowledge, so have my colleagues and students. We have learnt so much from each other. We have worked together in a difficult and constantly changing environment. Our offices are housed in temporary structures which heat up like ovens in the sun and leak when it rains. Regardless, the department has remained determined and used whatever resources are available. I've prepared courses including laboratory classes from what seemed like nothing when I started. This semester, the labs have been greatly assisted by a large delivery of equipment for which the department has been waiting for several years. We have lots of microbiological media which I have been incorporating into the labs in order to put them into use.

Our final year students will start their final year research projects this semester. The microbiology projects have been very popular and my colleagues will be very busy supervising students. Some of the students will investigate the incidence of food-poisoning organisms in fruit juices from local restaurants as well as bacteria carried by cockroaches and other insects. Others will investigate traditional methods of improving the quality of

drinking water which will complement our research looking at the bacteriological quality of the drinking water supply. The students are enthusiastic about their projects and I am looking forward to hearing about the results.

Now I will return to the UK which seems many worlds away. Now doubt I will settle back to the commercialised lifestyle very quickly and will forget what a privilege it is to having running water and hot showers. However I will never forget Ethiopia, its varied peoples and its thirteen months of sunshine (Ethiopia uses the Julian calendar). It has not been easy living here but it has definitely been a worthwhile experience which I would recommend to anyone who is thinking about it.

References

- (1) AIDS epidemic update 2001, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and World Health Organisation (WHO), December 2001.

Further Information

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

Jenny Search

Debu University, Ethiopia