

4. Eritrea

Post-war Politics and Higher Education Students in Eritrea

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Introduction

Recent research projects have focused on students and youth in Africa. The situation of youth and students is the best barometer of a society's political and economic well being. The collapsing economies of African countries, neo-liberal and global ideologies, information technology and the image of the West are at the centre of discussions of structural constraints on youth and the agentic decisions young people make amid all the social problems. Africa, as a continent, has had diverse politico-economic experiences resulting in different challenges for young people.

Several African countries have plied a course of political developments from communal economy, autocratic governments to liberalized economy and electoral governance. In the 1980s and early 1990s, regime change occurred in several countries mainly as a result of pressure from civil society.¹ The pressures came not significantly in the form of deliberative and rational discussion that many theories advocate, but as a result of protests and demonstrations in major urban centers. Youth and students, in particular, figured prominently (as they have always been) in the history of post-colonial Africa. As Mahmood Mamdani put it,² the urban population rediscovered the discourse of 'rights' again for the second time since opposition to colonial governments. Since then, however, the situation of youth has not improved. It seems as if globalization is presenting youth and students with tastes that they cannot satisfy in their countries. Such a persistent problem has led some scholars to use the label 'lost generation'.³ The marginalization of young people, at least in its present-day form, may be the overall structural consequence of the rise of neo-liberal capitalism.⁴

On the other hand, the role of African youth in the political arena is perceived as a significant departure from authoritarian enterprises inaugurated by the nationalist ruling classes. Mamadou Diouf⁵ argues that the youth has played a crucial role in the configuration of nationalist coalitions and that they have been the first group in society to manifest, in practical and often violent ways, hostility toward the reconstituted nationalist movement. The manifestations of youth opposition may differ from country to country, as Lamont and Thevenot⁶ acknowledge, because there are national cultural repertoires operating as cultural tools that are unevenly available across situation and national contexts. Along the same line, youth and students in Eritrea are challenging nationalist projects and the post-liberation discourses. Eritrea's political history and national cultural repertoire presents its youth with unique constraints and opportunities. Eritrea gained independence through a thirty-year armed struggle while many African countries were going through the transition to democratic forms of government. Eritrea's nation-building project was therefore a result of the long struggle for independence and has thus resulted in memories, experiences, perceptions and interpretations of events on the part of both the liberation movement leaders, on the one hand, and the receiving public on the other. Independent Eritrea's development and nation-building strategies are thus a mixture of these nationalist projects and commitments and the neo-liberal economic demands that the country's location brings.

After a bloody border war with Ethiopia, Eritrea's nationalist project has been challenged. University students played a prominent role in challenging national development projects and discourses. Comparatively speaking, the challenges and consequent political dissent and repression of student movements can be viewed in terms of the crisis of the single-party system in Africa.⁷ Eritrea's experience is unique and, at the same time, similar to that of other African countries. It is similar in that students and youth have played an active role in relation to the state and its national projects as mediated through different institutions. It is unique for it still shows the power of nationalist duty-bound ideology, and contestations had to be more at the ideological or cultural level in order to be effective. In most African countries, mainly for reasons related to the historical period in question, contestations were for the most part framed materially, pregnant with such neoliberal consequences as rising inequality and economic deprivation, and corruption by state officials that aroused popular resentment. The salience of the nationalist ideology is manifested in issues of state legitimacy, citizen participation and war mobilization. Eritrea's pursuit of national autonomy through thirty years of war demonstrates the continuing importance of nationalism as an instrument for moulding and shaping collective identity and political aspirations.⁸ It is therefore important to look at Eritrean students in higher education and analyze their perceptions and evaluations of their lives and involvement. It is important to

investigate the role of nationalist ideology in students' life evaluations, their involvement in the political process and how their political demands are shaped and articulated.

Background: Discourses on Nationalism, Post-war Crisis and Student Opposition

Eritrea gained independence through a protracted thirty-year period of armed struggle and the requisite large-scale social mobilization. Independence came with its own collective memory, a euphoric nationalist feeling and a political culture that prioritized the national collective good over individual rights. Nationalist ideology, especially that of national duty, has dominated policy and political discourse in independent Eritrea. Eritrea is located in a region notorious for its history of inter-state conflicts and thus national defence has become central in determining national strategies and policies. The national development project had thus introduced a national service programme with multidimensional aims, including youth participation in development activities. National service for all adults aged 18 to 40 and a summer work programme for secondary school students were introduced in 1994. Both are mandatory for all young citizens of Eritrea. Students have been and still are actively involved in these national projects. Circumstances have, however, geared the national service programme more towards national defense rather than reconstruction and development.

Eritrea fought a border war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000 — a costly and devastating war by all standards. That war had a devastating effect, displacing a huge population and causing what appeared to be a long overdue split and dissent within the government and the ruling front⁹ in 2001. Private newspapers started entertaining critical opinions and eventually the government banned all private newspapers in September 2001.¹⁰ Dissenting government officials and newspaper editors have been in prison for over seven years, without any formal charges brought against them before a court of law. The government has collectively accused them of 'breach of national security'. In the same period, university students' opposition to part of the 2001 national summer work programme and the ensuing trials led to confrontations between the University Students' Union and the government, prompting the government to take harsh measures against the students.¹¹ Such unprecedented events could be considered the political opportunity seized by the youth to oppose state policy. Consequently, the president of the students' union was detained along with other students in a desert camp. The detention, which sadly resulted in the death of two students, was strongly condemned in both national and international circles.¹² Students opposed the national summer work programme for several reasons. The main reason raised in their negotiations with the university administration was their

unmet demand for financial help to cover their educational expenses. Moreover, the students' union demanded autonomy in managing the summer projects and in its press statements questioned the legality of the summer programme, citing ILO labour conventions. Throughout the proceedings, the students' union presented itself both in newspaper articles and speeches as the protector not only of the interests of students but also of those of society at large.

Viewed from a political perspective, these events signal a crisis of legitimacy and a challenge to the nationalist discourse and practice that had enabled the government to introduce changes without much resistance from the population. In general, post-independence Eritrean history has been dominated by nationalist ideology — a powerful force that has lent legitimacy to the liberation front and ushered in macro-structural changes.¹³ The political culture has been characterized by ambiguous nationalist discourse¹⁴ and also by a culture that subordinated political creativity to the cult of efficiency and rationality.¹⁵ Though there has not been any in-depth research on the political culture of Eritrea, its nationalist culture which gives priority to subordination and unity and, in particular, its discursive stress on unity of ideas has been regarded as a potential problem for the development of a vibrant public sector in Eritrea.¹⁶ However, the aforementioned recent political events somehow mark a change from this nationalist political culture, notwithstanding the heavy-handedness of government's response to dissent and opposition.

Higher education institutions provide students with vital space for making far-reaching claims on citizenship issues in the national political system. The state and society also instill great expectations in students, especially higher education students, when it comes to nation-building and national development projects. The short-lived student movement at the University of Asmara touched on core issues relating to state legitimacy, the discourses and practices of citizenship and national identity in Eritrea. It questioned and challenged hitherto accepted discourses. Students were caught between making their case by dint of universalist arguments regarding national citizens' rights as well as particular issues pertaining to their participation in the immediate development projects.

These political events are worth investigating both for their relevance to the political history of Eritrea and its political generations, as well as for what the current reality in contemporary Eritrea represents in terms of comparative African history and politics. In terms of Eritrea's political history, national programmes that had gone unchallenged in theory and practice came under critical scrutiny by the student body. In such scrutiny, students referred to international human rights conventions, citizenship rights and their duty as educated citizens and to the socio-economic problems they face.¹⁷ The university has also served as a forum for discussing several issues. The situation within the university was also discussed in the then private press.¹⁸ There was a split between the government and the ruling

front. Several fundamental political questions were raised by students and the government reacted by jailing the students' union president and forcibly moving the students into desert camps for the summer service. This highly politicized decision was condemned as a flagrant violation of basic human rights. No active student movement existed thereafter. However, one significant effect of this activism was the change in the nationalist pre-figurative political culture, described by some as a 'culture of silence'.¹⁹ The student movement broke this culture of silence and questioned or disputed the received discourses and policy practices. However, its long-term effect is yet to be seen as student opposition to state practices is increasingly expressed in more individual, as opposed to, collective actions and decisions. .

From a comparative historical standpoint, Eritrea seems to be at the stage where most African countries were forty years ago, that is, shortly after they acquired independence. When most countries had had enough of autocratic power and were going for electoral democracies, Eritrea was still just emerging as an independent and sovereign country for the first time in its history. It was a time when many African economies were being liberalized and structural adjustment programmes were at the centre of national programmes. Around same period, large numbers of military and one-party dictatorships were crumbling in the face of massive civil protests and demands for political change.²⁰

It is important to view students as a political generation,²¹ and then study their perceptions of life situations, future aspirations and social involvement in the aftermath of such a contemporary chain of events. Two distinct political generations emerged from Eritrean political and popular discourse during the last war with Ethiopia: The '*Yeka'alo*' (the 'Can Do') and the '*Warsay*' (the 'Inheritor of the legacy'). The national service programme began on the premise that it would inculcate military discipline in post-war Eritrean youth and thus narrow the gap between the *tegadelti* (freedom fighters) and future generations,²² the '*Warsays*', who were in their early teens when Eritrea was liberated. These terms were initially popularized by popular songwriters and subsequently became household words. The term '*Yeka'alo*' comes from a popular song of the late 1980s when the Eritrean People's Liberation Army destroyed the Ethiopian army in a strategic town in northern Eritrea. The term '*warsay*', which generally describes the national service generation, was popularized in 1998 after a famous song. In the same vein, the Eritrean government proposed a new rehabilitation programme in 2002 captioned the "*Warsay-Yeka'alo campaign*". In addition to discursive distinctions, this generational divide is manifest in political attitudes and power-sharing and possibly signals shifts in perception and levels of nationalism and citizenship.

Historical Evolution of Higher Education in Eritrea

The University of Asmara (UOA) is the only university in Eritrea. Although Eritrea had been an Italian colony since 1890, the development of higher education only dates back to the late 1950s when the University of Asmara was inaugurated. Unlike other colonial governments, the Italian colonial government limited native education to elementary level. The missionary congregation, Pie Madri della Nigrizia of Verona, Italy, officially established the UOA on 20 December 20 1958 when Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia by a United Nations resolution. It can be argued that the increase in the student population triggered the nationalist mobilization drive towards national liberation. In 1958, a famous demonstration was staged in Asmara when the Eritrean flag was replaced with that of Ethiopia and the two formal languages of the Eritrean government were replaced by the Ethiopian official language.²³ In that demonstration, the youth, especially students played a major role. Student mobilization and demonstrations were also instrumental in the revival of nationalist sentiments in 1960.²⁴ Thus, the same generation of students who flocked to universities in Eritrea and Ethiopia produced the leaders of the liberation movements and the ruling class of present-day Eritrea.

For the greater part of its history, the university was part of the Ethiopian higher education system and was relegated into specialized fields of study. It was only after the independence of Eritrea in 1991 that the university was restructured to meet the needs of the new nation. The restructuring enabled it to contribute to the nation-building process. In 1991, an international conference was organized to map out the principles and institutional structures for the reorganization of the university. Over the years, the university increased its fields of study and student population. The university had only 10 programmes in 1993 and these have grown to 45. The university of Asmara had about 5000 student in 2003. In Eritrea, education is free and the university offers free education, meals and dormitory facilities for those who come from outside Asmara. There are plans to introduce fees but such plans are still on paper. Fees do not even seem to be on the university's scale of priorities.

The future of higher education in Eritrea may follow trends similar to those in other African countries where the trend is to privatize universities and reduce state involvement in higher education. However, as of now, adjustment and liberalization in the educational sector have not affected higher education in Eritrea. Instead, the university's model and its relationship with the state and its students has taken a form of nation-building wherein educational expenses, including catering and dormitory expenses, are covered by the university and students are required to contribute to different national development projects through the national service programme.

Study Methods and Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

This research was conducted as part of the CODESRIA comparative research network on Youth and Higher education. The data collection took place in the summer of 2003 in Asmara, Eritrea. The respondents were chosen using a purposive sampling method designed to make the sample representative of students from different fields of study, number of years in higher education and gender. It should be noted that the study was undertaken after the short-lived student movement and in a situation of post-war economic depression. It is therefore important to show how students view their life conditions and future life aspirations. The data collection methods used were a survey, in-depth interviews and archival research. Primarily, a questionnaire was developed, tested on thirty students, redesigned and finally administered to 96 students. The questionnaire consisted of 65 questions and the reporting in this paper is based on selected questions only. The analysis in this paper is based mainly on this survey data. Moreover, few selected interviews were conducted with students who were part of the students' union and others to further investigate students' perceptions and experiences. I also use archival data such as newspaper articles, speeches and communiqués to relate some important events.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of survey respondents. The sample is 72 per cent male and 28 per cent female. This is representative of the student population at the University of Asmara, for example, in 1998. Students who joined the university were 86 per cent male and 14 per cent female and for 2002, the student population was 90 per cent male and 10 per cent female. These two batches would correspond to fourth-year and first-year students in this sample. The sample also consists of students from different faculties: Social Sciences (32.3), Education (12.5), Law (10.4), Natural Science (12.5), Business (8.3), Health Sciences (13.5), Agriculture and Engineering (10.4). Eighty-three per cent of the students have participated at least in one summer work programme whereas 57 per cent of them have completed military training as part of their national obligation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N= 96)

	Percentage
Male	72
Female	28
First Year	7.3
Second Year	18.8
Third year	38.5
Fourth Year	26
Fifth Year	9.4
Have been in summer work programmes	83
Have been employed	33
Have completed military service	57.3

Background Characteristics and School Performance

Family background is one of the most important factors that affect students' performance, social involvement and future life plans. One way of looking at the role of family background in student academic performance is to see how family responsibilities interfered with schoolwork among students. Family responsibility is important as it indicates social living arrangements of students and it would potentially influence students' perceptions and actions in other domains of their lives. In the University of Asmara, only students coming from outside the city of Asmara are allowed to stay on campus. A question was included in the survey that asked students whether family responsibilities interfered with the student's schoolwork. Results are presented in Table 2 showing the frequency of interference in relation to the residence status of students.

An overall mean test difference shows statistically significant difference in the mean of interference frequency reported (Chi-Square is 8.9, $p = .038$) among those who live on campus, with relatives, with parents and by themselves. A look at the mean frequencies of each of these categories shows that, students living with relatives report the highest frequency of family responsibility interfering with their schoolwork. This may be due to the nature of the relationship, as living with relatives puts more pressure on students to help with family matters. The groups with the second highest reported frequency of family interferences are those who

live on campus and this may have to do with the obligation they feel because they are unable to help their families in the day-to-day activities. Those who stay with parents or by themselves are less likely to report interference of family responsibilities in their schoolwork. They have on average a mean value that is less than the total mean value. In sum, students living at home, whether with parents or by themselves are at an advantage of not having family responsibility interfering with their academic work.

However, there is no significant difference with respect to gender of the students in the level of family responsibility interference. This is interesting in light of the low level of female enrolment in tertiary education and the explanation usually given is that female students bear a lot of responsibilities at home. But this may be due to self-selection of the female students, as once they have joined the university, they are less likely to take on more family responsibility that they otherwise would. With respect to the religion of the family in which the students were raised, there is no significant difference in the reporting of family interference from students coming from different religious backgrounds.

Table 2: Since entering the university, indicate, “How often you felt that your family responsibilities interfered with your schoolwork?”

Residence	Mean	Gender	Mean	Religion	Mean
Total	2.75*	Total	2.75**	Total	2.73***
Stay on campus	2.96	Male	2.74	None	3.0
Stay with relatives	3.17	Female	2.78	Orthodox	2.65
Stay with parents	2.42			Catholic	3.0
Stay alone by yourself	2.5			Protestant	2.25
				Moslem	2.80

Note: N=96, (1 not at all, 2= rarely, 3= occasionally, 4=frequently).

*Chi-Sq=8.9, DF= 4, p=. 038, ** Chi-Sq= .035, DF=1, P=. 85, ***Chi-Sq= 3.2, DF=2, p=. 49

One way of evaluating students' experiences in higher education is to study their evaluations of the benefits they get from institutions of higher learning. The way students evaluate their university experiences is based on their background characteristics such as family residences, gender and military service experiences and these in turn determine students' evaluations of their future life plans and aspirations. Students were asked how much their knowledge in different fields

and areas, understanding of several issues and their involvement in student matters changed during their stay at the university. Statistical results are reported in Table 3. Overall, more improvements in knowledge of fields of study is reported followed by critical thinking, general knowledge and global issues respectively by all students. Students report the lowest average of improvement in their knowledge of people from different cultures. Breaking down results by students of different residences, we find significant differences only in the knowledge of people from different cultures and understanding of global issues. Students who live on campus report the highest improvement in their knowledge of people from different cultures as a result of their stay in the university. This clearly would be due to the opportunities for interaction which the university living arrangements provided to students. On the other hand, students who live with their parents report better understanding of global issues as a result of their stay in the university.

There is almost no significant difference between male and female students in the amount of reported changes in knowledge in different areas. Overall, students report that their knowledge and understanding has remained about the same or increased during their stay at the university. Previous military service experience, however, produces some significant differences in certain areas of knowledge and involvement. Students who have not done any military service by far report that they have acquired better knowledge in their fields of study whereas students who have done military service are more likely to report that they have gained a greater understanding of social problems facing the country during their stay in the university. As a result, students with military service experience are more likely to report that their ability to think critically and their involvement in issues that affect students have increased as well. Therefore, prior military service coupled with better knowledge of social problems results in more student involvement.

Current Life Perception and Future Life Plans

One's life plan is articulated within the overarching cultural norms and historical values of a given society. Thus, individuals plot the trajectory of their lives on the societal map, based on actual and perceived uncertainties surrounding current structural conditions. The perception of African youth and the level of agency they occupy paradoxically have been perceived as constrained and creative. The collapsing economies and failing political systems have led to the view that African youth are "a lost generation".²⁵ In this light, youths are perceived as *powerless*, exploited and homogenous in their experiences. In another perspective, they are simultaneously the "terrors of the present" or "errors of the past" and in some cases, "the prospect of a future".²⁶ Following the former view, students often tend to portray themselves as demoralized individuals who are unlikely to see

themselves as bearers of civil and political powers with the identity and status of full citizenship. On the other hand, the status of students has a liberalizing effect granting that the absence of parental control gives students a chance to undertake various social experimentations with their personal and social identities. Thus, students in higher education occupy an important societal position in terms of individual social mobility and involvement in social and political issues of consequence to society at large. In this section, we look at students' future life aspirations and plans and how they perceive their future and the future of the country in light of their experiences and socio-economic background.

In contemporary Eritrea, the post-war crisis and the prolonged military mobilization of youth for war efforts has disrupted the life plans of many young men and women. In relative terms, university students are more privileged and have more predictable life trajectories than their counterparts in the national service. However, given the country's economic and political situation students may not feel that their lives are so predictable in the long term. Many students have also participated both in military service and summer work programmes. As aforementioned, students have demonstrated a certain level of opposition to national service projects that led to brutal confrontation with state authorities. It is therefore the central part of this study to find out the differences in life aspirations and plans among those who have had experiences in these programmes and those who did not have. A central assumption here is that military mobilization might have resulted in altering the trajectory of the life course of many students and their perception and future prospects. In general, military service is a major disruptive factor in the life course, although the effects of service in a peacetime army are less deleterious. States intervene most drastically in the lives of their citizens when they are at war.²⁷ The best way to capture such changes is in the perception of current life position and future life plans of students. Several factors affect students' perception of their situation and prospects. Thus we will also look at the impact of students' family residences, gender and religiosity on their life plans and perceptions.

The survey included a question on how predictable students think their current life situation is, on a scale from 'not at all predictable' to 'very predictable'. Overall, students on average think that their lives are between 'somewhat unpredictable' to 'pretty predictable'. The results from ANOVA mean differences show a significant difference in the mean value of predictability (F-value= 2.92, p=.025) among those who live on campus, with relatives, with parents and by themselves. The result shows that relatively those who live with parents score higher on predictability followed by those who live by themselves and with parents and those who live on campus score the lowest. This residence variable indicates much more than residence. The university's policy is such that only people who come from outside the city of Asmara are allowed to stay on campus. So those

Table 3: Since entering the university, “How have the following things changed?”

	Male	Female	Total
Your general knowledge	4.1	4.0	4.07
Your knowledge of your field	4.34	4.3	4.33
Your knowledge of people from different cultures	3.66	3.74	3.68
Your understanding of social problems facing our nation	3.81	3.7	3.78
Your understanding of global issues	3.97	4.0	3.99
Your ability to think critically	4.26	4.33	4.28
Your involvement in issues that affect students	3.4	3.5	3.44
Completed military service	No	Yes	Total
Your general knowledge	4.16	3.95	4.07
Your knowledge of your field	4.07	4.53	4.33**
Your knowledge of people from different cultures	3.73	3.61	3.68
Your understanding of social problems facing our nation	3.91	3.61	3.78*
Your understanding of global issues	4.05	3.9	3.99
Your ability to think critically	4.38	4.17	4.29*
Your involvement in issues that affect students	3.62	3.18	3.43**
Residence (Stay on campus, with relatives, with parents, alone by yourself)			Total
Your general knowledge			4.07
Your knowledge of your field			4.33
Your knowledge of people from different cultures			3.68*
Your understanding of social problems facing our nation			3.78
Your understanding of global issues			3.99*
Your ability to think critically			4.29
Your involvement in issues that affect students			3.43

Notes: (1= much worse, 2= worse, 3= about the same, 4= better, 5= much better)

** P<. 05, * p<0.1

who stay on campus are those who come from outside the city and would be more likely to come from less privileged families. Besides, the support the other students get from parents and relatives may have increased the sense of predictability of lives among the other groups. As to those who live by themselves, it may have to do with self-selection with those better endowed with resources living by themselves and thus having better scores.

With respect to gender, there is a significant difference in the ways male and female students perceive the predictability of their future. Female students are more likely to report that their current life situation is predictable. This is an important finding in the context of future life plans of both sexes. For example, female students are more likely to report that they will get married in the next ten years than are male students.²⁸ Thus, female students may feel they have more life opportunities and that may be the reason for their reporting a more predictable current life situation. Interestingly, students who have been to military service training are not in any statistically significant way less likely to report that their lives are unpredictable. However, students who have never been to any summer work programme are slightly more likely to report that their current live situation is predictable. One's religiosity is important in giving meaning to life thereby making people feel that their lives are predictable. Religious commitment has also offered many young people a way of escape from social marginalization.²⁹ However, the mean difference test results do not show any significant differences among students who attach varying levels of importance of religion in their lives. That is, students' levels of religiosity do not affect their perceptions of the predictability of their current life situation.

A related variable that indicates students' current reality and future life plan is whether students live their lives without much thought for the future. On average, students disagreed with the statement that 'they live without much thought for the future', indicating that they think a lot about the future. Similarly, there was a statistically significant difference in the level of agreement to the statement "You live your life without much thought for the future" (Chi-Square 17.4, $p = .027$) among those who live on campus, with relatives, with parents and by themselves. In the same pattern as in the case of life predictability, those living on campus tend to report less disagreement with the statement that they live their lives without much thought for the future. With respect to gender, male and female students equally disagree with the statement that they are living their lives without much thought for the future. In other words, there is no significant difference among them. Both report that they are living with much thought for their future. In like manner, there is no difference between those who have completed their military service and those who did not in their disagreement with the proposition that living without much thought for the future. All report that they are not living without thought of the future.

University students are relatively privileged in general. Moreover, in the context of Eritrea, as many youth are serving in the national defence forces even including former university graduates, it is safe to argue that university students occupy the most privileged social position. Fifty seven per cent of the respondents have also gone through military training at one point in time. Therefore, it is logical to expect that students will develop evaluations of their life situations in comparison with people of the same age who are not able to study at the university. Thus, the respondents were asked: i: 'Compared to other people of your age outside the university, how successful are you?' on a scale from 'very successful' to 'not at all successful'. On the average, student responses fall between 'slightly' and 'not at all' successful. That is, university students do not think that they are more successful than their age counterparts who do not study in higher education. A mean difference analysis shows (Tables 4 and 5) that there are no significant differences in how successful students think of themselves compared to their peers outside the university along residence, gender and military service status of students. Overall, students report that they are between 'slightly successful' and 'not at all successful' compared to other people of the same age outside the university.

Career Choice and Life Plans

It is important at this point to consider the career choices students have and the importance they attach to different career choices. Students' preferences for their future careers reflect both their conceptions of success and their perceptions of reality of the country and the times they live in. The investigation of future career plans is important not simply because it may enable us to determine the degree to which student career aspirations are met, but more importantly because such information reveals the values which are likely to guide students behavior.³⁰ To explore the dimension of career choice, respondents were asked what their plans are after graduation. Respondents were also asked to consider the importance of future career choices in five areas: I) To get further education, II) A career in the private business sector, III) A career in government, IV) A career in the NGO sector and V) Becoming successful in a business of your own. Respondents rated the importance of each of these career choices on a scale that ranges from 'not important' to 'essential'.

The first results presented are about what actual plans students have after graduation. Thirty six per cent of the students plan to get a job after graduation whereas thirty-four per cent of them plan to leave the country for further studies. A chi-square difference test between plan of future career in NGO and the different plans do not demonstrate any significant dependence between them (Chi-Sq= 15.4, p=. 64) whereas the same test (Chi-Sq= 56.4, p=. 000) shows a relationship between the importance of getting further education and these different plans. This can be interpreted in a way, as those who think getting higher education

Table 4: "How Predictable is your Current Life Situation?"

Residence	Mean Value	Gender	Mean	Military service	Mean value	Summer student service	Mean value	Religiosity value
Total	2.43*	Total	2.44 **	Total	2.43***	Total	2.43+	2.44++
Stay on campus service	2.2	Male	2.31	Military service	2.35	Summer	2.37	2.48
Stay with relatives	2.3	Female	2.74	No military	2.54	No summer	2.75	2.52
Stay with parents	2.7							
Stay alone by yourself	2.5							

Note: (1= not at all predictable, 2= somewhat unpredictable, pretty predictable, 4= very predictable).

*Chi-Sq=7.5, DF=4, p=. 025, *Chi-Sq=3.5, DF=1, p=. 024, ***Chi-Sq=. 79, DF=1, P=. 29,

+Chi-Sq=1.95, DF=1, p=. 09, ++ Chi-Sq=3.5, DF=4, P=. 29

Table 5: Thought for future and perception of success

Residence	Thought for the	Mean value	How successful	Thought for the	Mean value	How successful	Thought for the	Mean value	How successful
Total	1.67*	3.36+	Total	1.67**	3.36++	Total	1.67***	3.36++	Total
Stay on campus	2.07	3.15	Male	1.66	3.34	Military service	1.6	3.3	
Stay with relatives	1.2	3.5	Female	1.66	3.34	No military service	1.76	3.6+++	
Stay with parents	1.29	3.55							
Stay alone by yourself	1.0	3.5							

Notes: N=94, "you live your life without much thought for the future" (1= strongly disagree, 2= slightly disagree, 3= neither agree nor disagree, 4= slightly agree, 5= strongly agree).

N=95, "Compared to other people of your age outside the university, how successful are you?" (1= very successful, 2= moderately successful, 3= slightly successful, 4= not at all successful)

*Chi-Sq=17.4, DF=4, p=.027, **Chi-Sq=.042, DF=1, p=.87, ***Chi-Sq=.54, DF=1, P=.57,

+Chi-Sq=4, DF=1, p=.13, ++Chi-Sq=.079, DF=1, p=.71, +++Chi-Sq=.31, DF=1, P=.46

is more important for their future are more likely to report wanting to have postgraduate training and leaving the country for further education as well. So in general, getting higher education seems to be the most important way to get mobility for the future for most students in Eritrea.

The results demonstrate that leaving the country to work elsewhere accounts for only 6.3 per cent of students. These results are in stark contrast to the survey on Zimbabwean students. Among the Zimbabwean students, leaving the country to work elsewhere is the plan for 31 per cent of students whereas leaving the country for further studies accounts for only 9 per cent of student plans. This, in part, can be explained by the big number of postgraduate students studying in South Africa under the Eritrean government's human resources development programme and the fact that further education remains as the only way for young people to leave Eritrea. That is to say, the Eritrean students see leaving the country for further education as a way of social mobility whereas for Zimbabwean students employment migration is the best hope.

Table 6: What are your Plans after you finish your Training/Degree?
(Comparison of Eritrean and Zimbabwean Students)

	Eritrea Sample (N=96)	Zimbabwe Sample (N=96)
Get a Job	36.5%	47.9%
Pursue higher degree (post graduate)	18.8%	9.4%
Leave country for further studies	34.4%	9.4%
Leave country to work elsewhere	6.3%	31.3
Other	4.1%	—

Upon considering occupations students desired, the striking finding is the similarity of responses between both genders as well as between those of different military training status. Overall, a career in the NGO sector is the most important choice for many students while a career in government is ranked of lowest importance in their future career plans. Becoming successful in one's own business is the second most valued career choice for all students in the sample. Planning to get further education has a mean value of importance that puts it third out of the five choices provided to students. However, a career in the private sector is ranked as the second lowest important career choice for students. This pattern is almost the same for both genders and students with different military service completion status. All career choices, but for the NGO sector, have the same mean value of importance for both male and female students. More female than male students

reported that a career in the NGO sector is so important to their future career plan. Though not statistically significant, the mean value of importance of becoming successful in one's own business is higher for males while that of government career is higher for female students.

Table 7: Importance of Future Goals: Means on Selected Variables, by Gender, and by Military Service Status

Comparison of Male and Female Students		
	Male	Female
1. To get further education	3.94	3.96
2. A career in the private business sector	3.63	3.59
3. A career in government	2.59	2.73
4. A career in the NGO sector	4.37*	4.85*
5. Becoming successful in a business of your own	4.34	4.04
Comparison of those who completed military service with those who didn't		
1. To get further education	3.94	3.95
2. A career in the private business sector	3.55	3.71
3. A career in government	2.61	2.63
4. A career in the NGO sector	4.50	4.51
5. Becoming successful in a business of your own	4.26	4.24

Notes: All items scored 1 (not important) to 5 (Essential). *P<. 01

Student Involvement

Student involvement in politics takes place in two interrelated arenas - the university campus and the world beyond its gates.³¹ As indicated in the previous section, one of the reasons for the summer 2001 student union confrontation with the government was the involvement of students in matters that affect them and their ever-growing demands for involvement in the planning of the national summer work programme for that year. The issues raised were primarily related to terms of payments of the summer programme but the different communiqués issued by the student's union at that time show that students were raising wide-ranging questions. Many people outside the university criticized the students' demand for payment as being self-interested, especially as many youth were still serving in

the mobilized national defence forces without pay. Thus, students' communiqués argued strongly that they were doing this for the national good and tried to defend themselves against arguments of self-interest.³²

Older research on African students suggests that the 'politics of self-interest' enables students to challenge the state when their interests are directly threatened and support it when it suits them.³³

Relying on student surveys on Ghana, Tanzania and Uganda, Barkan argues that politically active students in the industrial world focus their attention on problems that have little to do with their material self-interest whereas students in his sample were mainly driven by self-interest. Thus, he concludes that entry of African students into the political arena is motivated less by idealistic and ideological concerns and more by concern for personal gain. These observations made in a study done in the early 1970s correspond to the immediate post-independence period of those countries and we use those conclusions as starting questions to investigate what determines student involvement in political issues among University of Asmara students. We ask whether it is self-interest or knowledge or the perception of their position in society that determines students' involvement.

In this study, rather than making a distinction between in-campus and outside involvement, the question probed respondents' levels of involvement that affect them both on campus and elsewhere during their stay in the university. Respondents were asked to rate their involvement on a Likert scale, i.e. whether it has decreased, remained about the same or increased over the time they have been at the university.

The results (Table 8) from the involvement question show that there is no difference among male and female students and the number of years in the university and the field of study of students on levels of involvement in issues that affect students. However, completion of military service results show a significant difference in student involvement. Those who completed military service have an average of 3.62 while those who never did any military service have a 3.18 mean score of involvement. On the other hand, those who completed one or more summer work programmes is not different in terms of involvement from those who have never done any summer work programme. This may be a result of the experiences military training provided students, thus leading them to be more involved in changing their situation.

Table 8: ANOVA Table of Mean Differences in Involvement that Affects Students

	F-value	P-value
Comparison of male and female students	.35	.55
Comparison of students of different years of study	.89	0.47
Comparison of students who stay on campus and with parents	1.38	.24
Comparison of students from different faculties	.45	.86
Comparison between those who completed military service and those who didn't	6.74	.01*
Comparison between those who have been to summer work and those who didn't	.23	.62

Notes: Involvement was measured with the question “Since entering the university, how much has been your involvement in issues that affect students”, and codes 1(much worse) to 5(much better). *P< .05 level of significance.

A further look at results from correlation of involvement with selected variables shows that there is a modest significant relationship between those who think they will get a well paying job after graduation and their involvement in issues that affect students. Students who think that they are less likely to get a well-paying job also report less involvement. On the other hand, students' age and the number of times one has been in summer work programmes do not have any significant correlation with student involvement, though signs indicate that with age involvement decreases while with the increase in the number of summer work programmes students' level of involvement increases. There is a positive relationship between students benefiting from different activities in their stay in the university with their involvement. That is, the greater the reported change in understanding of social problems facing the country, the greater the knowledge of people from different cultures, the more improvement in student involvement reported. Similarly, improvement in ability to think critically and in understanding of global issues and knowledge of one's field of study have a mild positive correlation that is, the students who reported an increase in those areas of knowledge and understanding are also more likely to report that their individual involvement also increased. In sum, these correlations indicate that involvement is more influenced by changes in one's perception of local and global issues and less by perception of one's prospects for future success. In a way, this supports the view of the university as a space that provides students with ideas for activism and involvement.

Table 9: Correlation of Student Involvement with Selected Variables

	Correlation coefficient t
Will get a well-paying job after graduation +	-.32**
Age	-.14
Number of summer work programmes involved	.056
Understanding of social problems facing our nation	.41**
Knowledge of people from different cultures	.43**
Ability to think critically	.33**
Understanding of global issues	.21*
Knowledge of your field	.21*

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed),

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

+ 1= almost certain, 2= a good chance, 3= a 50-50 chance, 4= some chance, 5= no chance

However, correlations analysis does not give a definitive answer to the issue of causal direction. Thus, I estimate OLS regression models (Table 10) of student involvement as a function of the same variables. Model 1 includes whether students think they will get a well-paying job after graduation as a predictor. The responses for the prospective job variable were coded from 1 (almost certain) to 5 (no chance). Results show a significant negative effect of future job prospect variable on level of involvement. This is interpreted as follows: the lower students perceive their prospects of getting well-paying jobs, the lower the levels of involvement in student matters they also report. Thus, students who perceive the prospect of a well-paying job after graduation are also more likely to get involved in student matters during their stay in the university.

The addition of age and number of summer work programmes students attended do not improve the overall regression model and are not significant predictors of involvement. However, the addition of a series of variables that tap into students' intellectual experiences at the university improves the model. But only those who report to have gained a greater understanding of social problems facing Eritrea are more likely to report that they have increased their level of involvement in issues that affect students in general. Changes in other areas of knowledge such as global issues, field of study and critical thinking do not in any statistically significant way determine student involvement. Interestingly, however, the perception of future prospective jobs consistently in all models reduces the level

of students' involvement. Thus, students who don't think they will get a well-paying job are less likely to report increased involvement as a result of their stay in the university. However, the magnitude of the effect of future job perception is less than that of the reported change in understanding of national problems and it is therefore safe to say that on average students' involvement and participation is determined more by knowledge and perception of national issues, followed by personal prospect of career and employment. This interpretation is supported both by the arguments that conceptualize the university as a sphere that teaches students to be more cognizant of social issues and it also speaks to the nationalist discourse of duty and obligation that is prevalent in Eritrea. This is not to say that self-interest and perception of future prospects of individual students do not matter. Rather, as the results show, self-interested perceptions do determine students' involvement but that students' involvement is more likely to be determined by the changes in students' knowledge and understanding.

Table 10: Regression of Student Involvement on Selected Variables

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Will get a well-paying job after graduation	-.27 (.08)*	-.26 (.08)*	-.192 (.087)*
Age		-.017 (.02)	((.021) -.023
Number of summer work programmes involved		.05 (.07)	.062 (.067)
Understanding of social problems facing our nation			.301 (.117)*
Ability to think critically			.097 (.178)
Understanding of global issues			.051 (.136)
Knowledge of your field			.068 (.105)
R-Square	.104	.12	.26
R	.32	.35	.51

Notes: Results in parentheses are standard error values.

* Indicates level of significance at the .05 level.

Discussion

Our investigation of the students at the University of Asmara was more of an exploratory research and thus looked at many aspects of the students' lives. It investigated the students' educational experiences, their current life situation and future career plans as well as their involvement in matters that affect students' lives. The analysis of the data collected on the students reveals interesting patterns. The study suggests that residence at home puts students at an advantage of having to focus on their academic work without much interference of family responsibilities. Interestingly, female students are not more likely than male students to be disadvantaged by family responsibilities. On the other hand, campus living enables students to get acquainted with people of different cultural background and thus socializes them well. Both male and female students report that they have gotten more knowledge in their respective fields of study and their ability to think critically has increased as a result of their university education.

The analysis demonstrates that students do not think their current life situations are predictable. On average, students think that their life is between 'somewhat unpredictable' to 'pretty predictable'. These results are expected, given the current conditions prevailing in the country. However, family support mediates the feeling of life predictability and thus those who can count on family support are more likely to feel that their current life is more predictable. In addition, female students felt a greater sense of predictability, perhaps partly because the national service puts more pressure on male students. Another interesting finding from the study is that, irrespective of the experience of military service and the level of religiosity students feel, all students think that their life is between 'somewhat unpredictable' to 'pretty predictable'. The results are somewhat surprising as they suggest that students' prior national service experience as well as being so religiously involved does not in any significant way determine whether their life is predictable or not.

Along the same line, all students irrespective of gender, military service status, or residence status do not think they are living their lives without thinking much of the future. That is, students do a lot of thinking about their future lives and they are concerned and have future career and other life plans. Certainly, this shows students are not a 'lost generation' without much of future plans but instead think a lot about the future. Individuals make evaluations of their lives in comparison to people in their countries with similar characteristics. The analysis shows that overall university students do not think they are more successful in their lives than other youth of the same age who are not in the university. Students feel only slightly successful if any. This is an interesting finding compared to the relative advantage university students have. As will be discussed shortly, their involvement is more influenced by their evaluation of their life chances as not significantly different from others of the same age.

In terms of social mobility and career choice of students, getting a job and leaving the country for further education are the most perceived ways of social mobility and success among Asmara university students. In terms of job desirability and level of importance, NGO sector jobs are the most desirable jobs followed by self-owned business. On the other hand, government jobs are the least desirable jobs. These results reflect the economic rewards for the respective jobs in light of the fact that university graduates in the civil service are still working under the national service programme only for pocket money.

Results have shown that both material perception and idealistic concerns and perception are significant predictors of students' involvement. Unlike Barkan's assertion, however, students in Eritrea are more likely to think their involvement as coming from bigger concerns for national issues than material self-interest. Moreover, involvement levels do not significantly differ in terms of social experiences such as age and service experience but are significantly determined by future career prospects and perceived improvement in understanding of the national problem during their stay at university. As previously discussed, the student movement of summer 2001 tried hard in its discourses to claim its questions were not driven by self-interest of students but more for concern for university autonomy and the role of university students in the society. It placed importance on the obligation higher education provides students to question authority and national projects. The argument seems elitist in the sense of claiming students' role in the public sphere. Similarly, Mamdani (1995), discussing the role of the university in African societies, argues that the question of academic freedom and university autonomy began to take a political meaning for students and academics against state authoritarianism and growing fiscal crisis. He further argues that even as students battled, often inspired by larger social concerns, or the demand for university autonomy, they remained unshaken by elitist assumptions that they are true representatives of the populations. Such elitist tones, however, exist in students' perception of their life situation as they do in the perception of other youth in the country at large. Thus, students' political involvement in national projects and discourse also takes into account the reality that students share with other Eritrean youth in the political and economic situation of the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case study shows that the Eritrean higher education system provides students with the knowledge and space for activism and that students' involvement is more influenced by their awareness of the social problems of the country and perception of their social position and responsibilities than by their material well-being and future prospects. The research has also shown that Eritrean higher education students feel a low level of predictability of their lives though they are far from a 'lost generation' who do not give much thought to the future.

Rather, they hold seemingly elitist discourses on their role in challenging national projects and policies, but this perception is compounded by the assessment of students' positions as being significantly better than that of other youth in Eritrea. Thus, it seems that they feel they represent and speak on behalf of other youth in Eritrea. Overall, student activism and involvement in higher education are driven both by self-interest and nationalist perception of their social roles in society.

The future of higher education in Eritrea and the role of the University of Asmara remains uncertain as the university has not admitted any new students for the last three years as there is a policy shift to start new technical colleges at the expense of the university. Even though the research findings from this paper cannot confidently make any predictions on the future of higher education and student activism in Eritrea, recent developments clearly have thwarted the developments gained as a result of the short-lived student activism of 2001. The prospects for democratic transition are receding in Eritrea and there is no space for open political activism. Only time will tell what forms of engagement student activism will take in the near future.

Notes

1. Bratton and Van de walle, 1997.
2. Mamdani, 1998
3. e.g. O'Brien, 1996.
4. Camaroff and Camaroff, 2001.
5. Diouf, 1996
6. Lamont and Thevenot, 2001.
7. Mamdani, 1994.
8. Calhoun, 1997: 122.
9. The publishing of a letter by some Eritrean academics abroad, and later, on the open letter distributed by some senior members of the Ruling Front and member of the National Assembly have changed the political scene. This was an event that senior members of the Eritrean ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) have, for the first time ever, openly criticized President Issayas Afewerki. (UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, June 5, 2001).
10. An Eritrean National Assembly session held in January 2002 addressed the issue of the private press and set up a commission to establish a 'responsible' independent press. The Eritrean government has stressed that the ban on the private press is a 'temporary suspension' and that its commitment to the growth of a free press is on track. In the same session, the draft laws for election and formation of political parties were repealed, and the former was ratified while the law for the formation of political parties is postponed since 'the majority of the population required that it is not timely for political parties to be established.' To date, no private press exists in Eritrea.
11. The birth of the students' union in the university dates back to 1998, when the university administration took the initiative to form the union. Once the union was established, it played an important role in mobilizing students during the three rounds of

offensives from Ethiopia. It organized the mobilization of students for military training, donation of blood from students and other important activities. In the summer of 2001, unlike its previous activities, it started becoming more assertive in campaigning for students' rights.

12. On 22 August, it was reported that university teachers were convening a meeting on the condition of the students starting on 20 August. On 26 August, a local NGO, Citizens for Peace, condemned the measure taken against the student by the government and called for the release of the university student. Source: Keste Debera Newspaper, 22 August 2001. On the other hand, the HRW in a report titled '*Escalating Crackdown in Eritrea, Reformists, Journalists, Students at Risk*', New York, September 21 2001, (also available online at www.Hrw.org) discusses how students at the University of Asmara, the only one in the country, had joined in criticizing the government by demanding better treatment from the government and consultation on matters that concern them.
13. Tronvoll, 1998
14. Iyob, 1997
15. Makki, 1996
16. For example, Calhoun, 1995.
17. In a graduation ceremony speech the students' union president spoke on the issue of contention between students and the university about the 'summer work programme'. He argued that the main factors for the opposition include legal, administrative and economic considerations. Under the administrative problems, he talked about the university being an autonomous institution. 'The university should not receive instructions from any government body. Giving autonomy to a university demonstrates readiness to work for the advancement of your subjects.' In terms of the legal aspect of the matter, he posed a question: 'Is this programme justified under the law? Eritrea is a signatory to the international conventions of ILO. The role of university students, in general, and the students' union in particular can be tremendous in this context. If we can give students full responsibility to handle the summer work programme by themselves, there is no reason why we should not expect an efficient implementation of it.
18. Many editors and journalists in the private newspapers were graduates of the University of Asmara or registered students who have had the same experiences as the students of the university.
19. Iyob, 1997
20. Bangura, 2000
21. In addition to sharing similar developments and historical experiences, they can be considered as a political generation, since they have become aware of their historical position and came together to try to work for social and political change (Braungart and Braungart 1986).
22. Iyob, 1997.
23. The federal arrangement stipulated that Eritrea would have its own flag, which it received from the UN, and that Tigrinya and Arabic will be the official languages. This was put in the Eritrean Constitution drafted by a UN representative, Anzo Matienzo.
24. Ammar, 1997.
25. Ammar, 1997.

26. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001, pp. 33
27. Mayer and Schoepflin, 1990.
28. A mean differences test between male and female students on the probability of their being married in ten years time (Chi-Sq = 14.5, p = .005). Female students were more certain that they will get married in the coming ten years while on average, male students thought there was 50 per cent chance of that happening.
29. O'Brien, 1996.
30. Barkan, 1975, p. 54.
31. Thousands of students and other youth have left Eritrea since the original writing of this chapter in 2004. The further totalitarization of the Eritrean state and lack of hope for future improvements in the political and economic situation of the country has forced thousands to leave the national army and national service projects and seek refuge in neighboring countries and furthermore into Europe and the Americas.
32. In the same graduation speech, the students' union president after saying that: '*University students have demonstrated their devotion to the motherland in the war against the Woyane,*' he goes on to say that a nation or government does not need support at wartime only. 'If we are to understand the concept of "support" only in the context of war, then we can confidently declare the nation is not getting the right support from its university students. We should also expect them to carry out in-depth studies and evaluations of policies and procedures drawn up and implemented by the Government as well as engage in the promotion of the rule of law.
33. Barkan, 1975, p. 129

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