



Governance Brief 24

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Summary

Considering the persistent challenges underlying the quality of higher education in Somalia, the FGS Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education proclaimed, on 16 August 2023, a directive authorizing the introduction of a 'foundation year' that would precede the university undergraduate first year and will take effect in this academic year 2023/2024. The directive was issued at a sensitive time when the start of the new academic year was only a few days away. This governance brief analyses the concerns and criticisms related to the directive, and explores the potential consequences it could have on students, parents, and universities. The brief also looks at the possible positive outcomes that the new instruction could have for students and universities. The brief concludes with policy recommendations that include, among others, that the Ministry put in place the necessary bureaucratic mechanisms to address the higher education quality, including a separate higher education law, and an effective national higher education commission, which remains transitional and inactive; the Ministry of Education needs to base its decision on legislation that provides such conditions to guarantee its universal application.

About Somali Public Agenda

Somali Public Agenda is a nonprofit public policy and administration research organization based in Mogadishu. Its aim is to advance understanding and improvement of public administration and public services in Somalia through evidence-based research and analysis.

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Analysis of the University 'Foundation Year' Directive: Substance, Concerns, Consequences, and Policy Considerations

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Introduction

The FGS's seemingly lackluster commitment towards higher education governance continued until recently when the incumbent Minister of Education, Farah Sh. Abdulkadir Mohamed, promulgated a directive on 16 August 2021, introducing a foundation year to the university education due to take effect in the 2023/2024 academic year. This could be considered the first significant attempt to attempt to intervene in the largely unregulated higher education industry in Somalia. The directive cited challenges inherent in higher education, including poor quality of tuition, thousands of students who annually graduate without being equipped with the skills and knowledge needed at the market, and those who could not adapt to master's degree programs abroad. These were all cited as justifications for the adoption of a foundation year. The directive sparked heated discussions online and offline from a spectrum of stakeholders that is much wider than those who will be directly affected if it is applied.

Under the successive leaderships of the FGS Ministry of Education, meaningful intervention measures had not been taken to address the major issues at stake in the higher education sub-sector. The former Minister of Education Abdullahi Godah Barre constituted a five-member temporary National Higher Education Commission – a higher education regulator body – in September 2019. Later, on 11 March 2022, four new members were included in the commission by then-minister Abdullahi Abukar Haji, bringing the total members to nine, according to the Education Act. However, that effort did not help address the problems in the sub-sector, and this body is now apparently inactive. Similarly, Godah Barre decreed that no registered university can confer undergraduate degree programs in less than 4 years, but some universities did not heed the order and still maintain 3-year undergraduate courses. This governance brief critically examines the substance of the new 'Foundation Year' directive and the challenges and implications it might have for universities, parents, and students. The brief will conclude with several policy considerations.

The University Bridging Year Directive: Substance & Rationale

The FGS Ministry of Education adopted the bridging year decision, according to the directive, after closely scrutinizing the state of higher education in the country in the past 2021/2022 academic year, and having considered the recommendations drawn from the national education conference convened in Mogadishu between 13 and 17 March 2023.

The directive carried four instructions of which the introduction of a bridging year preceding the first undergraduate year was the most significant (the latter three instructions technically complement the former). Accordingly, it instructs that:

1. All prospective students to enroll at local universities in the 2023/2024 academic year shall sit for a foundation year.
2. The foundation year period shall be two semesters excluded from the 4 or more undergraduate years, depending on which track students are pursuing.
3. Courses that shall be taught in the foundation year include Somali language (literature, culture, and history); English & Arabic languages (or any other language

used for university instruction); Islamic Studies (basic concepts & Islamic values and morality); academic writing skills; conflict resolution skills, and critical thinking.

4. The Ministry of Education will develop the bridging year's curriculum framework with the help of experts from Somalia's universities

The promulgation of this directive to, ostensibly, address the critical issue plaguing higher education – poor quality of undergraduates – drew various reactions from relevant stakeholders. In the past, many concerned voices had repeatedly called for the right policy interventions to reform the sub-sector. However, these had not fallen on the receptive ears of policy-makers.

The new directive signifies a critical departure from the past education sector policy-making orientation. Previous policymaking appeared to be preoccupied by the lower levels of education; disinterested in and/or hesitant to make bold decisions affecting a sub-sector run by powerful stakeholders. The new impetus and orientation towards the long neglected universities could give more weight to the higher education agenda in the Ministry's discussions about priorities and resource allocation.

Concerns & Criticisms

Although the measure was laudable, the directive gave rise to several concerns and criticisms including the timing of the directive, the process followed for its adoption, and an incongruence between the prescription and the apparent problem.

First, the timing of the promulgation is the primary object of criticism aimed at the directive. The decision apparently did not consider time appropriateness, and it seems rushed. The directive was given only a few days before the resumption of university classes and when universities were in the middle of enrollment for the new students whose exam results were released on 6 August. Sources from local universities that SPA spoke to about this matter indicated that at the time of the directive pronouncement, universities had already set out their plans for the new academic year and allocated their resources accordingly. It is also felt that the decision was declared at a time when most of the students and their parents had already made up their minds about what university and program to enroll in.

Second, the process followed for the making and unveiling of this critical directive has been criticized. A source from a higher education institution has decried the introduction of the foundation year as being a 'predetermined decision' from the Ministry. This is because, the source claims, the Minister of Education only hinted at the issue to representatives from higher education institutions during a meeting they had with him in late July this year on separate business and asked them to give their input.

Subsequently, higher education institutions formulated their response and presented this feedback to the Minister on 2 August this year. Though SPA did not obtain the document that contained the input of the higher education institutions, a source familiar with the matter told us that the suggestions they proposed included is the argument that there is no need for introducing a bridging year for the university education. Instead, their proposals included harmonizing the undergraduate years; introducing A levels in secondary education (which would raise the total of students school years to 13); and setting standards for enrollment in university programmes based on specific scores.

However, just two weeks from the day they submitted their suggestions, the Ministry of Education publicized the new measure introducing a university bridging year. Following this, the Association of Somali Universities - a 51 universities body based in Mogadishu - held a gathering in the Somali capital on 22 August and issued a 5-point communique. Though they did not oppose the directive explicitly, they seemed to implicitly dodge the application of this directive in the upcoming academic year. The Association pointed out other pressing priorities that the Ministry should deal with such as improving the quality of schools; developing a national qualification framework; asking for adequate time to prepare themselves for the adoption of the foundation year; and technical assistance for its implementation.

Third, besides the process, there remains an apparent incongruence between the problem and the prescription. The Ministry of Education justified its decision to introduce a foundation year on the grounds of the poor quality of higher education, which allegedly resulted in the dire unemployment challenge that graduates confront on the job market. It is plausible that there has been no proper identification and diagnosis of the problems of higher education that would warrant the introduction of such a significant intervention. If that had been undertaken, a different set of interventions and prescriptions may have been introduced that would address problems in universities. These would include issues around pedagogy, teaching staff, the mismatch between programs and market demand, and lack of minimum grade requirements for student enrollment on different programs.

In a similar vein, the foundation year has been criticized for using the one-size-fits-all approach to the courses to be taught to students on different tracks. As is explicit in the directive, all students to be enrolled in different tracks (including humanities and social sciences and the natural sciences) will be taught on similar foundation courses. The Ministry of Education did not consider the different foundation needs that different students studying different tracks need to ensure they benefit from this extra tuition and be prepared for their subsequent undergraduate courses, as the Ministry envisions. Nevertheless, the design of the foundation courses is seemingly more relevant to the humanities and social sciences track students at the expense of the interests of others.

The Ministry of Education has announced only 6 courses to be taught in the foundation year. Most of the courses are taught in universities at different semesters but critical thinking and conflict resolution are new to the majority of the universities. Thus, some cast doubt on the results that could be expected from this experiment and dismiss it as merely reinventing the wheel. However, difficult questions were raised in this regard. Is it a lack of these courses that has hindered and undermined quality standards in higher education and has resulted in the rampant unemployment of young graduates? Or is it a lack of an up-to-date regulatory framework, and a regulatory body that ensures these quality standards?

Apart from this, the FGS Ministry of Education proclaimed the directive without having a curriculum framework in place. It said it will develop the framework with the help of the experts from the same universities which have already demonstrated their reluctance to the adoption of the new foundation year, at least for now.

Consequences for Students & Parents

It is premature to fully assess and determine the impacts that the implementation of the foundation year will have on students and their parents. However, it is doubtless that there will be short-term and mid-term consequences, five of which are noted below

Firstly, the foundation year will prolong the time it will take students to finish their undergraduate programs. Students will not be equally affected by this problem because of the existing differences in the lengths of degrees. For example students who are to pursue medicine or engineering will be disproportionately impacted as it will take them 7 and 6 six years respectively to graduate compared to the 6 and 5 years that were in place before this new directive. Given the extended years of such programs, prospective students who are interested in studying these programs may remove these programs from the list of choices they have. This could ultimately result in a reduced number of graduates from these essential programs.

Secondly, the prolonged years of university education may discourage high school graduates from enrolling in universities altogether. Some students are motivated and/or pushed by their parents to enroll at university partly to distract them from engaging in harmful activities if they become unemployed and idle all day. However, the new scheme is likely to provide an excuse to the less interested students to escape from enrolling at university, justifying that they can't wait five or more years to graduate and rather look for other shorter-term means to manage their lives.

Thirdly, and undeniably, the new scheme will burden the already financially strained and squeezed families as they will be required to pay fees for more semesters. This will result in poor families who have been struggling with university payments for their daughters and sons being even more difficult position to enroll other family members. Consequently, if families have to choose between sending new school graduates to universities under these conditions, girls would likely be sacrificed in favour of boys.

Fourthly, under the pretext of the extended duration of the university graduation years, prospective students from relatively well-off families will mount pressure on their parents to send them to universities abroad which, they could argue, offer relatively higher quality education and have fewer years to graduation than those at home. It could be argued that although the number of students who go abroad for university in recent years has decreased due in large part to the availability of diverse programs at local universities, the new policy could increase students going abroad for education, which could have further implications for the sustainability of local universities.

Fifthly, there is a worry that some universities might take the pre-university year less seriously and consequently allocate fewer resources. This might include cramming pre-university students in crowded classes and assigning less qualified lecturers to deliver foundation courses. Student attendance and engagement may also be low. This would be detrimental to the expected outcomes from this foundation year.

Consequences for Universities

The implementation of the foundation year will also have implications for universities. Firstly, it creates, at least in the short term, disruption to the pace of the enrollment, which was ongoing before the promulgation of the directive. It has led uncertainty for both students and universities as the majority of the new graduates from schools had already planned to enroll in specific programs.

Secondly, the new measure will likely reduce the number of students to be enrolled at universities. This is because some students are likely to either stop enrolling at universities, postpone their plans, or consider going abroad for higher education. Consequently, this is likely to impact the sustainability of most of the universities that

have already been struggling with financial challenges.

Thirdly, there is a concern raised by some from higher education institutions that the new measure will not affect all local universities equally. The foundation year would be in favor of universities that offer three-year programs. Though the directive explicitly clarifies that 4 years is the minimum undergraduate graduation, these sources worry that students may flock to and enroll at universities that still don't comply with this 4-year undergraduate program directive (in order for them to graduate after a total of 4 years including the foundation year). On the other hand, there is also a concern that universities in Puntland (and Somaliland) may not comply with the new measure and thus become alternatives for students from other states.

Fourthly, the new measure arguably is likely to provide opportunities to universities abroad (primarily Kenyan and Ugandan institutions), which have hitherto been a major destination for Somali students seeking postgraduate studies. In that sense, students from families that can afford to pay for universities abroad have now easy-to-sell justifications to convince their parents to allow them to do their undergraduate studies in Nairobi or Kampala or beyond in countries such as Turkey and Malaysia considering the comparative advantage their universities might have over local universities in Somalia in terms of increased years of the undergraduate programs and relative quality of the education. This will likely dwindle the market share that local universities have been receiving from the school-graduating students, and it, henceforth, will aggravate the financial challenges many universities have been struggling with.

Positive Prospects for Students & Universities

Despite the concerns and criticisms raised, and the likely implications highlighted above, the foundation year idea does hold out some positive prospects for both students and universities if and when there are good intentions and commitment from the relevant stakeholders – the FGS Ministry of Education and universities. It is likely that many high school students graduate at a younger age than they are supposed to, given various issues facing secondary education in Somalia. These students often graduate having little understanding of which university to choose; which program to choose; the career prospects of different programs; and to what extent the available university programs are relevant to the job market needs. Similarly, students don't receive any guidance from the schools they graduate from or other sources about the next steps of their education journey. Therefore, the foundation year could be a window of opportunity and an eye opener for new students to familiarize themselves with their new environment and gain an understanding of the right program to pursue and its relevancy to their capacity, market, and affordability. This could happen through students' engagement with their lecturers who teach them foundation courses and those from the university campus they get to know. Further, the foundation year could provide new students with adequate time to decide which program to choose and save them from unguided decisions they can make about undergraduate programs they enroll in.

Secondly, given that they are new to university life, students often experience frustration and disorientation in their first year at the university. The foundation year could provide them with a whole year that is spent familiarizing and adapting themselves to the new setting. In this regard, the foundation year will likely facilitate a smooth transition to a university education. Students will grasp gradually, during the foundation, the rules applied in their respective universities, and this could facilitate healthy student-university/faculty relationships. More importantly, students will likely be prepared to embrace and cope with the load of the courses of the first year at relative ease.

Thirdly, the foundation year could offer new students flexibility to transfer from the respective programs they were initially enrolled in into programs within their universities or other universities they knew later during the foundation year corresponding to their passion, potential, and capacities. This new adjustment opportunity will save time for students who instead of permanently signing up to programs they have no idea about could instead change to programs that they suited to after having consulted with the right people in their respective universities.

Fourthly, it is believed that a major challenge to university students relates to their English language capacity, which is being used as the dominant language of instruction at local universities. If the English language, along with critical thinking courses, is assigned to the right lecturers, allocated more time, and provided the right curriculum, there are potentially significant benefits for new students that would allow them to perform better in their subsequent university education. This is because they would be able to better absorb the content of their relevant textbooks, summarize chapters, write assignments and express their answers, ideas, and thoughts clearly on exam papers.

Notwithstanding the concerns, criticisms, consequences of the foundation year and the appeal of the higher education institutions of postponing the implementing till next year, the Ministry has held a consultative meeting on the implementation of the foundation year between 2-4 September 2023 with representatives from local universities and higher education experts. Following the conclusion of the meeting, the parties issued a communique, which included, among others, that all that all universities implement the foundation year this academic year; universities allocate most of the hours of the foundation year to the medium of instruction at their universities; the examination marks of the foundation year courses will appear in the student's transcript, and all foundation course will be delivered during the foundation year along with courses from students respective programs. The parties, also, agreed to include essential Information and communications technology (ICT) skills to the foundation year, and change the Somali language into Somali studies.

Policy Considerations

Having examined salient concerns, criticisms, potential implications, and positive prospects of the foundation year, the following are policy considerations intended to help inform the FGS Ministry of Education and other relevant stakeholders involved in the issue to develop a workable and sustainable way forward.

1. The Ministry should put in place necessary and neutral bureaucratic mechanisms, including a fit-for-the-purpose higher education law, and a competent, independent, and inclusive national higher education commission. The existence of these instruments will be the appropriate way to improve standards in the unregulated industry. Additionally, with such instruments, the leadership of the Ministry will be freed from accusations of taking unilateral decision(s) without consultation with relevant stakeholders, but can instead proceed with applying the provisions of a relevant law.
2. The Ministry of Education needs to base its decision on legislation that provides such conditions to guarantee its universal application. As the directive lacks the required legal grounding, it could provide stakeholders (chiefly federal member states such as Puntland, which has already been resistant to abiding by the federal Education Ministry's decisions) legal justification to spurn the implementation of the directive in its jurisdiction. Meanwhile, the Ministry should seek the buy-in of all stakeholders and could use the higher education law, which is in the last stages of stakeholder consultation according to sources, as an avenue to pursue its ideal on restructuring higher education.
3. The Ministry should provide resources for courses that consider and satisfy the different needs of students going to different tracks. The courses to be taught during the foundation year favors social science students and puts science students in a disadvantageous position. It should reconsider including courses that also prepare the latter group for the programs they will study. Further, though the time is not in favor of the Ministry and universities, the Ministry should also expedite with care the development of the curriculum framework. In this process, it should recruit individuals who have expertise in the course of the foundation year to help develop the curriculum framework.
4. As key stakeholders, higher education institutions should demonstrate open-mindedness and readiness in accommodating the Ministry of Education reforms to the sector and not be skeptical and cynical about its plans. Maintaining business as usual has - and will continue to have - disastrous implications for all stakeholders including the private sector, public sector, graduates, and their parents.



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