

Expanding quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education

Rediet Tesfaye Abebe

PhD Student in Higher Education, University of Tampere, Finland

Contact: rediet.abebe@uta.fi

Bio: Rediet taught Sociology at Arba Minch University, Ethiopia. He completed a Master in Research and Innovation in Higher Education under the Erasmus Mundus program, and is currently attending PhD studies in Higher Education at the University of Tampere, Finland.

Suggested citation: Abebe, T. R. (2015). Expanding quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education. *Working Papers in Higher Education Studies*, 1(2), 20-42.

The article is available online at: <http://www.wphes-journal.eu/>

Expanding quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education

Rediet Tesfaye Abebe

Ethiopian higher education has a short history of quality assurance practice. Pressed with acute concerns on educational quality caused by massive expansion over the past decade, the Ministry of Education has adopted an external and internal system of managing and supervising the relevance and quality of higher education. In spite of this, the existing practice of quality assurance lacks comprehensiveness. It suffers from a disproportionate focus on the quality of core university missions, a lack of a robust conceptual framework, and disconnected approaches to managing quality. The paper therefore concludes that the current practice of quality management needs to be revised and updated in order to ensure success with regard to the assurance and enhancement of quality. In this respect, there is a need to develop a conceptually, legislatively and structurally comprehensive approach towards understanding and dealing with higher education quality. Quality assurance and quality enhancement activities also need to be tuned and complementary. There is also a need to commit more emphasis on enhancing quality

Keywords: Quality; quality assurance; quality enhancement; higher education; Ethiopia.

Introduction

Though the exact meaning of the concept has been widely debated, quality, as a topic of study, constitutes an important issue in higher education scholarship and practice. Tight (2003) fits issues such as course evaluation, grading and outcomes, national monitoring and system standards into the category of “quality studies” in higher education research. Another systematisation of thematic areas in higher education research made by Teichler (2005) positions the study of quality in higher education within knowledge and subject related aspects of the discipline. Despite the illusiveness of the concept and the way scholars provide competing theme systematisations, assuring and enhancing quality has nevertheless remained a challenging task to which a huge amount of resources are committed in various higher education systems around the world.

Located in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia has a young and quickly expanding higher education system. Although the country has a long history of elite education linked to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Saint, 2004), secular higher education started in 1950 with the inauguration of the University College of Addis Ababa. Since the last decade, however, Ethiopia has aggressively expanded its higher education, triggered by an educational system reform in the mid-1990s with a stated goal of massification as a way to reduce poverty and to develop the nation. Accordingly, the number of public universities climbed from less than 5 to 35, while a similar, radical proliferation also took place in the private sector. The public sector currently accounts for about 86 per cent of higher education enrolment in the country, with the remaining covered by private institutions (MoE 2013). At the time of writing, the construction of 11 additional universities is underway as part of the Growth and Transformation Plan II, which is expected to further increase enrolment in higher education. In this regard, Ethiopia has been faced with a tricky task of improving the quality of education delivered in institutions as well as expanding access for disadvantaged groups within society.

However, such massive expansion brought about acute concerns over educational quality, among other things. The enlargement of the sector put considerable strain on funding, academic staff, governance and leadership, physical resources, infrastructure and facilities, employability of graduates and other aspects (Ashcroft 2010). The combination of these challenges has made the concern over quality of education more ardent. The perception of declining quality has thus become common understanding among different internal and external stakeholders. Most higher education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa also suffer from similar setbacks (Materu 2007; Kebede and Msezane 2001).

As far as Ethiopia is concerned, existing studies on the issue of quality have focused on examining the concept itself (Rayner 2006; Ashcroft 2004), the methods and procedures of quality evaluation (Weldemariam 2008; Adamu and Addamu, 2012), the organisation and practices of assuring education quality (Seyoum 2011; Ashcroft and Rayner 2012; Kahsay 2012; and Regassa et al. 2013), the institutionalisation of quality assurance (Abebe 2014), the accreditation of private higher education institutions (Bekele 2009), stakeholder perceptions on quality (Lodesso 2012), role of quality education for meeting development needs, and other related themes. The adoption of internal quality

assurance, as opposed to previous dependence on external quality control by Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), has largely remained unaddressed. Moreover, existing studies focused on analyses at either the national or institutional levels, with little focus on presenting the link between the two approaches, i.e., the practice of quality assurance by HERQA, as the national agency for safeguarding quality, and that of several higher education institutions (HEIs). In addition, broad discussions of the weaknesses prevailing in the system are scarce.

This paper delves into the gaps and imbalances in existing quality assurance practices both at the national and institutional levels, thereby shedding light on possible remedial measures that could enhance comprehensiveness in higher education quality management. Diverse understandings of quality from literature and mission statements from Ethiopian universities will serve as key points against which the existing quality assurance practice is examined.

The data used in the paper are derived from primary and secondary sources. The analysed documents can be grouped into three categories:

- First, fourteen Institutional Quality Audit Reports were examined. These reports had been prepared by several private and public HEIs, submitted to the HERQA office, and organised into a series of publications. Preliminary examinations of these reports inspired a more thorough scientific analysis of quality assurance practices.
- Second, national and institutional legislative documents governing Ethiopian higher education were reviewed to derive the concepts and arguments to be presented in this paper. Of particular importance at the national level are the ‘Higher Education Proclamations’ (No.351/2003 and No.650/2009), the ‘Education and Training Policy’, and the Institutional Quality Audit guidelines endorsed by the HERQA for all HEIs of the country. At the institutional level, documents that were examined consist of quality assurance policies, senate legislations, and organisational structures of a number of HEIs.
- Third, data was gathered through consulting relevant literature on the topic of higher education quality. These include influential scientific studies undertaken in the context of Ethiopia and various countries across the globe.

To a limited extent, the author also drew on the informal discussions he had with a high-ranking HERQA official and several institutional quality enhancement officers of universities. The practical experience of working in a public university, previous involvement in data collection for a study on institutional quality assurance, and impressions from dealing with universities was put in perspective under few circumstances.

Diverse conceptions of quality

Scholars in the field of education and business management have developed a concern for quality and standards since the mid-1980s alongside the increasing demand for greater accountability (Frazer 1992) and efficiency. A number of works have attempted to provide comprehensive frameworks in conceptualising and understanding quality in education. These models attempt to incorporate various perspectives on how to define and therefore prescribe methods to deal with quality. Notwithstanding, extant literature on the concept indicates a lack of common understanding on what quality means. At least five major frameworks can be found in the literature.

First, Harvey and Green (1983) provide five sets of definitions that view quality as *exceptional, perfection or consistency, fitness-for-purpose, value for money, and transformation*. Second, Garvin (1987) bases market studies targeted at putting together a strategic analysis of quality management. It argues that quality can be understood using eight competing dimensions: *performance, features, reliability, conformance, durability, serviceability, aesthetics, and perceived quality*. Third, Adams (1993) proposes six ways of understanding quality as *reputation, resources and other inputs, process, outputs or outcomes, content, and value added*. Fourth, Cheng and Tam (1997) endorse a model that defines quality using seven different but related models by adopting theories from management into the field of education. Accordingly, quality is explained from the perspectives of *goal and specification, resource-input, process, satisfaction, legitimacy, absence of problems, and organisational learning*. Fifth, Gibbs (2010) provides the so-called ‘3P’ dimensions of quality for use by higher education practitioners and policy makers. It rests on a set of indicators: *presage variables* (staff-student ratio, quality of teaching staff, funding and quality of students), *process variables* (class size; class contact hours, independent study hours and total hours; the quality of teaching; the effects of the research environment; the level of intellectual

challenge; formative assessment and feedback; reputation; peer quality ratings; student support; and quality enhancement processes), and *product variables* (student performance and degree classifications; student retention and persistence; and employability and graduate destinations).

From the above discussion on various ways of defining quality, it is possible to conclude that:

- Quality is still a vague and controversial term to define. It is notoriously elusive and challenging to come by a universal definition. Mishra (2007) notes the existence of contending ‘relativist’ and ‘objectivist’ extremes on the understanding of quality. While some claim that ‘we know what it is though it is difficult to define the term,’ others suggested we should just give up worrying about such efforts.
- Quality has multiple meanings and there seems to be no consensus regarding which conceptualisation is the best. It can be observed that different scholars hold competing views even though some aspects correlate. Moreover, the way the concept is understood varies across different stakeholders, e.g. policy makers, students, parents, quality assurance agencies, or employers. Moreover, some of the different conceptions of quality mutually reinforce while others do not. The notion of *quality as excellence* and *value for money*, for instance, contain aspects that contradict each other while the understandings of the *high standard input* and *outcome* go hand-in-hand. It is therefore possible for a product or service to be ranked low on some dimensions of quality and high on others.

The existence of several meanings however does not necessarily mean that some groups are right and others are wrong. It is therefore important to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each framework and definition, as their applicability may be limited to certain contexts. The underlying purpose and context of any sort of definition should be considered as part of the analysis. This is because the understanding of quality may reflect a matter of individual interpretations and set of values. The meanings of the term has basis in key social settings such as tradition, value, expectation, and culture. Hence, it is arguable that some conceptualisations are relative to disciplinary background, context, personality, geographical location, academic qualification, and experience.

Figure 1. Multiple definitions of quality



- No single aspect defines quality comprehensively. “Educational quality is a multi-dimensional concept and cannot be easily assessed by only one indicator” (Cheng and Tam 1997, p. 23). No single definition of quality is all-inclusive. A multivariate analysis of quality is thus appropriate. It is imperative to combine both the quantitative and qualitative measures of quality if a comprehensive understanding of the concept is to be achieved.
- Quality also has a dynamic nature. The task of defining the term is contextual and evolving. This makes defining the quality challenging. Its meaning considerably alters depending on time and circumstances. It should therefore be clear that defining quality does not come to a stopping point instead it progresses along the debate and discussion among interest groups and stakeholders.

What is evident from the above discussions is that any endeavour targeted at bringing about a genuine improvement in quality needs to take the multi-dimensional nature of the concept into consideration. This argument is used later to analyse the gaps in the existing quality assurance practice of Ethiopian higher education.

Missions of Ethiopian universities

Similar to their counterparts across the globe, Ethiopian universities are tasked by the country's higher education proclamation with the fundamental missions of undertaking teaching and learning, research and community service (FDRE 2009, Article 4(2,4), 24(3), 26(1)). They are responsible for preparing mature graduates with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to thrive after university. The mission of teaching-learning also extends to assisting students in need of special support and providing academic guidance. Every university is required to undertake research that accounts for the priorities of Ethiopia in order to enable the country to solve its development challenges and build its capacity through technology transfer. Universities are mandated to promote and enhance problem-solving research for transfer of knowledge and skills. Finally, in the context of the so-called 'Third Mission', universities are also required to design and provide community service, consultancy, and other supplementary activities in areas related to their competences. The Ministry has launched a 'Science, Technology and Innovation Policy' to 1) encourage HEIs to become principal actors in the national innovation system, and 2) promote research, industry linkage and a national technology transfer framework. In this regard, HEIs are expected to forge partnerships with national and international industries for mutual benefit.

These core activities are not mutually exclusive but are instead interwoven and complementary. Engagement in any one of these mission activities essentially contributes to the effective undertaking of the others, thereby forming an intertwined system of activities. For instance, universities use the results of research and community service as input to deliver informed academic services and enrich teaching-learning. Similarly, engagement in teaching-learning equips academics with scientific knowledge and problem-solving skills without which conducting cutting-edge research and fruitful community service becomes impossible. As a common practice, Ethiopian universities dedicate officers, typically vice presidents, one to administrate each core function: academic affairs (i.e., teaching-learning), research and community services, and management and development. Despite this devolution, these functions should operate hand-in-hand.

Therefore, the standard and quality of conducting these core functions play a crucial role in the effectiveness and continued improvement of overall university activities.

National agencies and institutional quality assurance structures need to effectively manage all the core missions of universities. It is also imperative for these structures to be positioned in a vantage point, which allow them to oversee all activities and missions of universities instead of disproportionately focusing on a few.

The context of governance and funding mechanisms

The governance system of Ethiopian higher education is characterised by strong state regulations. HEIs have been experiencing diminishing institutional autonomy in academics, financing, human resources, organisational structure and the management of other institutional aspects. Although the higher education proclamations made provisions for self-governance, the reality is entirely different. A strong top-down authority is pervasive throughout the system. The State governs the following aspects of universities:

- Strategic direction and organisational structures for public HEIs - The appointment of public university Board Members, Presidents and Vice-Presidents falls under the strong influence of the Ministry of Education. A high-ranking politician from the ruling party also chairs the Board of each public university. The mission, vision, objective, and value of higher education are designed to correspond to national development directions. Institutional quality enhancement - With the help of a binding proclamation, the Ministry compelled institutions of higher learning to engage in the process of taking responsibility for assuring the quality of various aspects including course content, teaching-learning processes, student evaluation, assessment and grading systems, and professional development of academic staff. As a result, institutions have already worked towards setting up internal structures, particularly working on institutional quality enhancement since 2009. This brought the practice of an internal quality management onto the predominantly external one.
- Governance reforms - The major structural and functional transformations in higher education are initiated and forced by the Ministry resulting in compliance whereby universities are forced to accept new arrangements such as the Business Process Reengineering (BPR), Balanced Score Card (BSC) and Kaizen philosophy with minor modifications and contextualisation.

The critical point is that these negatively affect the ability of universities to decide on their internal goal setting, regulation, and executive leadership.

Similarly, academic issues are not excluded from the dominant state regulation. Student admission and enrolment ratios are directed by the Ministry. Except for non-regular students (students enrolled in evening, weekend, and summer programs), all full-time undergraduate students are assigned to different public universities in specified fields of studies. The overwhelming majority of seats in the postgraduate programs in public HEIs are reserved for state-sponsored public servants, which leave little room for self-sponsored students. This system negatively affects institutional competitiveness for high calibre students besides depriving students' right to choose. The power of the Ministry extends to setting training priorities in higher education. Inspired by the UNESCO recommendation of an international guideline encouraging a 60:40 distribution of national higher education enrolments between sciences/technology and arts/humanities (Saint 2004), Ethiopia's tertiary enrolment recently follow a more extreme 70:30 ratio. Despite this, there are signs of increasing freedom to recruit academic and non-academic staff at public HEIs, although salaries are centrally determined.

With staff salaries as an example, public HEIs are not financially autonomous. It is extremely difficult for institutions to retain meaningful self-governance in the face of complete financial dependence on government funding. Even though the federal government provides virtually the lion's share of the funding required to run public higher education, income-generating activities undertaken by universities, international development assistance programmes, and student cost-sharing payments constitute additional sources of revenue for the higher education system. The financial resources required to support quality assurance activities at national and institutional levels originate from such sources.

Though the proclamation promulgates the provision of block-grant budgeting based on strategic plan agreements between the Ministry and HEIs [FDRE 2009, Article 62(1)], what is still in practice is a line item budgeting. Failure to apply a block grant scheme deprive public HEIs the autonomy in spending and transferring budgets within their internal departments.

Private institutions are not entitled to receive funding from government, which to a significant extent relaxes the tight grip of the State on institutional administration, human resource management, organisational structure, and financial autonomy. Unlike public institutions, however, there is a strong state control on academic matters of private HEIs. This, for instance, takes a form of stringent criteria for pre-accreditation, full-accreditation, and accreditation renewals of study programs. Teferra (2005) argues that the ephemeral nature of government regulatory stipulations challenges the private sector. Private HEIs suffer from inconsistent regulations that at one time allow, and even encourage initiatives, only to outlaw the same initiative after a short period of time.

There is a shift from a full government funding to a shared financing model of public higher education. The soaring cost of public higher education became unbearable to the federal government in the midst of a massive construction of public universities. Historically, it was the sole responsibility of the government to cover the cost of higher education until a decade ago. Public institutions had offered virtually free education, while the tuition at their private counterparts steeply rose. A cost-sharing scheme subsequently came into effect in 2003 requiring all beneficiaries of public higher education to cover the full costs of boarding and lodging, and a minimum of 15 per cent tuition-related costs (FDRE, 2003b). According to studies conducted by Yizengaw (2007) and Woldegiorgis (2008), the factors behind this shared-financing include the escalating demand for enrolment, increasing per-student cost, and decline in available public revenue.

Incomprehensive approaches in current quality assurance practice

In response to the growing concern on educational quality, Ethiopia introduced the practice of quality assurance to its higher education at both the national and institutional levels with the help of major proclamations. At the national level, the Higher Education Proclamation (No.351/2003) made provisions for the establishment of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) whose objective is to exercise the mandate of safeguarding and enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education in the country (FDRE 2003, Article 78-85). Over the last decade, the agency has been handling accreditation permits, evaluating performance reports, supervising standards of institutions, and gathering and disseminating information on the status of quality. At the

institutional level, the most important legal framework that laid the groundwork for quality enhancement was the 2009 Higher Education Proclamation (No.650/2009). It required the establishment of a continuously improving and reliable internal system for quality enhancement at every institution (FDRE 2009, Article 22). This was facilitated by the understanding that many HEIs of the country had lagged behind in developing quality assurance strategies and establishing efficient structures that promoted a culture of continuous quality improvement at the institutional level. The implementation of the proclamation was a monumental step in the history of quality assurance in the Ethiopian higher education as it brought an internal quality maintenance practice in addition to the predominantly external one.

In spite of this, there are numerous gaps and imbalances within the young national and institutional quality assurance practices. These include, but are not limited to, disproportionate focus on teaching-learning, problematic structural positioning, legislative loopholes, lack of a robust conceptual framework, and disconnected systems for quality assurance and quality enhancement. The section below presents a detailed discussion of each the drawbacks.

Disproportional focus on the quality of core university missions

From an examination of the existing quality assurance practice in Ethiopia, there is an evident emphasis on the quality of teaching-learning over that of research and community service. The case in point, internal quality assurance centres at HEIs principally perform activities such as

- implementing internal quality audits,
- conducting program and course audits,
- reviewing and revising curricula,
- ensuring timely processing of accreditations and renewals thereof,
- developing tools and instruments for quality assurance,
- ensuring fair distribution of courses,
- monitoring the evaluation of academic staff by students, peers, and heads of academic units,
- monitoring continuous assessment and grading of students,
- regulating semestral academic workload of students,

- reviewing class size policies and application of active learning methods,
- preparing institutions for planned and spontaneous external audit, and
- liaising with HERQA on behalf of their institutions

In addition to this, internal quality assurance centres at public universities conduct trainings for academic and technical support staff on instructional skills, Higher Diploma Program (HDP), and English language enhancement. They also provide trainings on preparing exam, curriculum and module, and other topics.

All these tasks are primarily related to the teaching-learning aspect of universities. This indicates that there is a limited effort explicitly targeted at assuring the quality of research, community service and institutional management of universities. The strategic imbalance in quality assurance with respect to core missions of HEIs has roots in internal structural organisation of institutions, and national and institutional legislative gaps.

On the one hand, the problem has organisational origins. Internal quality assurance centres, as a common practice, are often subordinate to the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. They therefore lack the necessary legal and structural means to conduct quality assurance and enhancement measures for other important functions unrelated to teaching and learning, e.g. research and community service. It is also an obstacle in appraising the quality of technical support staff and administrative staff. Although barely recognised by HERQA and HEIs themselves, the formal organisational structure and the institutional chain of command prevent the development of a comprehensive, internal quality management practice. Reconsidering the structural position of internal quality assurance centres could therefore be vital in empowering an all-inclusive internal quality process and practice. Despite university autonomy, it is highly advantageous for HERQA to conduct studies and take lessons from international success. It could then endorse to HEIs a model of structural positioning for internal quality assurance centres, enabling them to supervise overall university activities. Placing internal quality assurance centres or directorates below the office of the university president and above the offices of the vice presidents for academic affairs, research and community service, and management and development could be one way to resolve the problem.

On the other hand, gaps in the higher education legislation also contribute to the strategic imbalance. As per Higher Education Proclamations No.351/2003 and No.650/2009, there is an observable disproportional focus on the quality of teaching-learning. Although both higher education proclamations clearly endorse teaching-learning, research, and community service as key objectives of the country's higher education, they have failed to consistently establish the direction for assuring and improving the quality of all key activities. For instance, the proclamations state the focus areas of institutional quality enhancement. Institutions of higher learning are required to take the responsibility for assuring the quality of course contents, teaching-learning processes, professional development of academic staff, student evaluation, assessment and grading systems, student evaluation of course contents, and methods and systems of delivery (FDRE 2009, Article 22). In contrast, a similar degree of focus and depth in quality management is lacking in the mission of HEIs for research and community service. Instead of directly setting the focus on assuring and enhancing the quality of university community service, for instance, the proclamation state the need to adhere to the university mission, legal and ethical codes, and the non-interruption in teaching-learning responsibilities when engaging in community service and other supplementary activities (FDRE 2009, Article 24(8)).

Similarly, the imbalance in the strategic emphasis is also reflected in the focus areas for institutional quality audit adopted by the HERQA. Research and outreach activities are combined into a single category in the audit. Meanwhile, student admission and support services; vision, mission and educational goals; governance and management system; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; program relevance and curriculum; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and graduate outcomes; and internal quality assurance all constitute separate components (HERQA 2006). Institutions often make a two-to-three-page report on their research and outreach engagement in their overall institutional quality audit report. Moreover, some universities have already enacted institutional policies for academic quality assurance that exclude other core functions, while several other institutions are following suit. The policies often contain descriptions of several issues, which include: quality assurance mechanisms, quality assessment tools, focus areas for internal quality assurance, and responsibilities for quality assurance management at various levels of university

structures. Once again, this is a reflection of the higher education proclamation and central dictation by HERQA.

Looking at existing trends, the pursuit of quality in service and institutional management is more appealing to private HEIs than to public ones. An exceptional case, however, happens at Mekelle University in Ethiopia, where the application of modern information communication technology is revolutionising service provision, e.g., eStudent database, eAttendance, eResearch, eLibrary, eProcurement). Although all institutions of higher learning face the problem of disproportionate focus on the quality of teaching-learning, private institutions generally appear to demonstrate more interest toward improving the standard and manner of rendering service to customers, essentially because of their profit-oriented nature. The pace of progress, however, is far from aspired standards.

In general terms, inadequate attention to the quality of research and community service can greatly undermine the role that institutions of higher learning are expected to play in this age of the knowledge economy and information society. In this respect, the current situation in Ethiopia is, for the most part, worrisome. For example, community service, or the 'Third Mission', is often narrowly interpreted as 1) extramural teaching, e.g. in the evenings, on weekends, during the summer break, and via distance-learning and 2) consultancy services to people and organisations within a closer geographical vicinity. Despite the importance of transmitting knowledge to the community, especially to professionals, such services constitute only some portion of the broader concept of university 'Third Mission' or community service. While universities are expected to play an increasingly important role in stimulating economic growth and social progress in modern knowledge societies, traditional missions of teaching and research have failed to give way to wide-range 'Third Mission' activities that facilitate its engagement with society and industry.

Yet the practice of Community-Based Education (CBE) at Jimma University can be considered a commendable step in the right direction. The university is a pioneering academic institution in Ethiopia that uses the community as a learning environment. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate trainings through an innovative community-based, team-based and research-oriented educational approach.

In spite of such isolated cases, the involvement of HEIs in research and innovation projects responsive to the economic, social, political, and cultural needs of society remains inadequate. HEIs of Ethiopia as a result need to work more towards 1) making contributions to government and civil society as well as the private sector, 2) assisting with economic performance, and 3) improving quality of life and effectiveness of public services.

Lack of a robust conceptual framework

There is neither a national nor an institutional working definition of quality—the very purpose of HERQA and internal quality assurance centres. This breeds a climate of confusion, and allows for arbitrary and inconsistent approaches in managing quality. It is hence imperative to clearly define the concept and its attributes. A comprehensive working definition could facilitate a consistent practical engagement across HEIs in the country. It could also channel institutions towards priority areas instead of striving towards an abstract entity in the vacuum. Various academic units in the universities could also derive their own conceptualisations of quality within the overall institutional definition, thereby enhancing a holistic approach.

Furthermore, current quality assurance practices address only certain aspects of quality, and therefore fail to recognise the multi-dimensional nature of the concept. Accordingly, there is an evident tendency to overemphasize the *process* aspect of quality whereby institutions of higher learning strive to ensure a smooth running of internal functioning and learning processes. In other words, the understanding of quality as an *absence of problems* is pervasive in the system. The engagement of HERQA and internal quality assurance centres (refer to section 5.1 to see what main activities internal quality assurance centres do) focus on assuring the prevention of discontinuities and defects in the teaching-learning process. Contrary to this, Bekele (2009) indicates that the accreditation of private institutions focuses on the standards of *inputs and other resources* as core criteria. This includes checking the standard and availability of classrooms, libraries, laboratories, offices, curricula, and other facilities. The procedure also focuses on evaluating the qualification of teaching staff, and inspecting whether student admission criteria set by the Ministry are maintained. However, addressing the

input and process dimensions of the concept alone cannot comprehensively capture and assess educational quality.

The higher education quality assurance system in Ethiopia fails to incorporate the assessment of other crucial aspects of quality such as quality of *outputs and outcomes*, quality as *fitness for purpose*, quality as *transformation*, quality as *serviceability*, quality as *satisfaction* of stakeholders, quality as *legitimacy*, quality as an *organisational learning*, and quality as *aesthetics*.

- Activities targeted at securing high-quality students and staff, financial resources, facilities and other inputs are limited due to the predominantly centralised allocation of fundamental resources at public institutions. Although the private sector is independent in this respect, institutions still need to do more.
- The evaluation of tangible and intangible impacts of educational processes at HEIs is, above all, very weak and often non-existent. The existing practices of assuring quality pay no attention to assessing the change in knowledge, skills, and cognitive capabilities of those undergoing a learning process.
- Assessments of employability, graduate destinations, occupational status, and income levels are far from emerging into the focus areas of current quality assurance practice. Assessing the extent to which graduates meet the specifications of employers is largely missing. For instance, Wodemariam (2008) underlines that the procedures and methods employed in institutional quality audits are not in a position to guarantee the assessment of these features.
- Over the years, evaluating whether HEIs satisfy the needs and expectations of internal and external stakeholders hardly became a standard practice. Accordingly, Lodesso (2012) indicates that the status of service quality improvement in Ethiopian public HEIs is very low. This corresponds with the general trend of quality assurance practices nationwide.
- Moreover, these institutions are overlooking the importance of assuring their legitimacy through upholding accountability to the public, securing support from community, and building a pleasant public image. Institutions need to do more in justifying a proper spending of public funding.

- There is also limited effort explicitly targeted at examining changing internal and external environment and the extent of proactive and continuous adaptation to these circumstances on the part of institutions.
- Finally, the attractiveness and tidiness of campuses is hardly understood as part of an overall quality. The aesthetic value of offices, class rooms, dormitories, dining halls, libraries, laboratories, and other facilities has not received the attention it deserves. Even worse, the majority of public universities are constructed around the outskirts of cities.

As a result, failure to properly integrate the multi-dimensional features of quality creates challenges. Cheng and Tam (1997) further claim that the lack of a comprehensive understanding and management of quality is the main reason behind the repeated failure of policies and strategies targeted at bringing about reforms on improving educational quality around the world. In this regard, Ethiopian higher education quality assurance is critically at risk.

Disconnected approaches to managing quality

Neither HERQA nor internal quality assurance centres of universities distinguish between quality assurance and quality enhancement. Even more, the existing link between the two approaches of quality management is weak and arbitrary. The nature of quality enhancement activities (e.g., providing trainings on instructional skills, Higher Diploma Program, English language enhancement) is limited and less connected with quality assurance efforts. There is no indication where the evidence suggesting the need for such types of training is obtained. Going through the procedure of assuring quality has been taken as an end in itself rather than a means to striving towards a desired level. There is a weak practice of using the results of assurance for enhancement purposes. The emphasis on procedures feeds a ‘more valued’ purpose of fulfilling formal requirements. It indicates the growing tendency of using the quality assurance “as a mere pacifier for the authorities”.

Therefore, quality assurance and quality enhancement activities need to be tuned and complementary, so that the outcome of quality assurance leads the direction and content of quality enhancement. Theoretically, compliance to a certain set of predetermined

standards is evaluated by quality assurance while quality enhancement sets in motion processes that enable improvement of performance towards achieving quality standards. However, quality assurance is far from becoming the driver for quality enhancement in practice. Enhancement has not become the overarching goal and aim of assurance. Quality enhancement mitigates quality assurance, but this principle has been ruptured. It is therefore crucial for HEIs, external quality assurance structures, and other stakeholders to understand the interplay between these two approaches in order to successfully deal with quality concerns.

Contradictory to the strategic aspiration of HERQA, the practice of dealing with quality in Ethiopia emphasises quality assurance over quality enhancement. While several activities targeted at assuring quality are carried out at national and institutional levels, internal quality assurance centres only engage in providing some types of training as the main method of enhancing educational quality in universities. Accordingly, the Ethiopian system takes the move to a desired status of quality too lightly while being over-occupied with assessing an actual status of quality. In the meantime, converging with the rising global trend to move from quality assurance to quality enhancement (Harvey and Williams 2010; Ewell 2010; Higher Education Academy 2008) only seems out of the grasp of Ethiopian higher education.

Conclusion

The aggressively expanding higher education system in Ethiopia needs to be cautiously shaped along the pathway of respectable quality. Although an external and internal system of supervising the relevance and quality of higher education was practiced for a little more than a decade, its achievements were by no standard adequate in properly addressing the enduring concerns that have been plaguing the sector. It is therefore essential to critically examine and revise current practices in order to improve success rates with regard to the assurance and enhancement of quality.

In this respect, the paper concludes by recommending possible corrective measures. First, there is a need to develop a comprehensive approach towards understanding and dealing with higher education quality. There can be two main components to this remark. On the one hand, it is imperative more than ever to balance the strategic emphasis between the quality of teaching-learning, research, community service and

other aspects of HEIs. Integrating this amendment in legislative documents and structural arrangements of institutions can be particularly significant. Most importantly, reconsidering the structural positioning of internal quality assurance centres within overall university organograms could be vital in empowering the entire process and practice of dealing with quality. On the other hand, there is a need to properly understand and assess the multi-dimensional aspects of quality instead of focusing on a few. In contrast to the existing predominant focus on the *input* and *process* aspects of quality, it is highly crucial to incorporate an assessment of other key aspects such as quality of *outputs and outcomes*, quality as *fitness for purpose*, quality as *transformation*, quality as *serviceability*, quality as *satisfaction* of stakeholders, quality as *legitimacy*, quality as an *organisational learning*, and quality as *aesthetics*.

Second, quality assurance and quality enhancement activities need to be tuned and complementary such that the outcome of quality assurance leads the direction and content of quality enhancement. In addition to strengthening the link, there is a need to commit more emphasis on enhancing quality by striving towards a desired level.

In general, although steps are being taken in the right direction, a lot remains to be done in order to philosophically, formally, and functionally integrate a robust quality care system into Ethiopian higher education and the everyday activities of its universities. Developing a real commitment for improving quality therefore becomes at the heart of such endeavours.

References

- Abebe, T. R. (2014). *Institutionalisation of quality assurance in an Ethiopian public university* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from: <http://tampub.uta.fi/handle/10024/96063>
- Adamu, A. Y. and Addamu, A. M. (2012). Quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education: procedures and practices. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 69, 838-846. Retrieved from: http://ac.els-cdn.com/S1877042812054663/1-s2.0-S1877042812054663-main.pdf?_tid=d1d7b314-af72-11e3-b8dc-00000aab0f6c&acdnat=1395239523_a6bf1e47b586ef433d64945942ccda1b

Adams, D. (1993). Defining educational quality. Improving Educational Quality Project Publication 1: Biennial Report. Arlington, VA: Institute for International Research.

Ashcroft, K. (2004). Emerging models of quality, relevance and standards in Ethiopia's HEIs. *The Ethiopian Journal of Education*, 13(3), 1-26.

Ashcroft, K. (2010, September 05). Ethiopia: dilemmas of higher education massification. *University World News: The Global Window on Higher Education*. Retrieved from: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20100903174508343>

Ashcroft, K. and Rayner, P. (2012). The purpose and practices of quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education: journey, adaptation and integration. *International Journal of Business Anthropology*, 3(2), 19-35.

Bekele, E. A. (2009). *The functioning of accreditation in Ethiopia: A study focusing on the views of private HEIs* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from: <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/31194/essetexsxthesisxfinal.pdf?sequence=1>

Cheng, Y. C. and Tam, W. M. (1997). Multi-models of quality in education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 5(1), 22-31.

Ewell, P. (2010). Twenty years of quality assurance in higher education: what's happened and what's different?. *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(2), 173-175.

FDRE (2003). Higher Education Proclamation (No.351/2003). Addis Ababa: Birhanena Selam Printing Enterprise.

FDRE (2003b). Higher education cost-sharing Council of Ministers Regulation (No. 91/2003). Addis Ababa: Birhanena Selam Printing Enterprise.

FDRE (2009). Higher Education Proclamation (No.650/2009). Addis Ababa: Birhanena Selam Printing Enterprise.

FDRE (2012). *Science, technology and innovation policy*. Addis Ababa.

Frazer, M. (1992). Quality assurance in higher education. In A. Craft (Ed.), *Quality assurance in higher education: proceedings of an international conference* (pp. 9-25). London: The Falmer Press.

Garvin, D. A. (1987). Competing on the eight dimensions of quality. *Harvard Business Review*, 65(6), 101-109.

Gibbs, G. (2010). *Dimensions of quality*. Helsington, UK: The Higher Education Academy.

Harvey, L. and Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1), 9–34.

Harvey, L. and Williams, J. (2010). Fifteen years of quality in higher education (Part two). *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(2), 81-113.

HERQA (2006, May). *Areas of focus for institutional quality audits* (Publication No. HERQA QA02/06/V1). Retrieved from http://www.idea-phd.net/files/3113/5410/6794/HERQA-Quality_Audit-Areas_of_Focus_for_Institutional_Quality_Audits.pdf

Higher Education Academy (2008, June). *Quality enhancement and assurance – a changing picture?*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/publications/QualityEnhancementAndAssurance.pdf>

Kahsay, N. M. (2012). *Quality and quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education: critical issues and practical implications* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from: <http://www.utwente.nl/mb/cheps/phdportal/CHEPS%20Alumni%20and%20Their%20Theses/thesis%20Kahsay%20final.pdf>

Kebede, A. and Msezane, A. Z. (2001). Development of African materials research and education for the 21st Century. *MRS Bulletin*, 26, 925-927.

Lodesso, S. L. (2012). *Stakeholder perceptions of service quality improvement in Ethiopian public HEIs* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from: http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/9484/thesis_solomon%20lemmal%20odeso.pdf?sequence=1

Materu, P. (2007). *Higher education quality assurance in Sub-Saharan Africa: status, challenges, opportunities, and promising practices* (World Bank Working Paper No. 124). Washington, D.C: The World Bank.

MoE (2013). Education statistics annual abstract 2005 E.C (2012-13 G.C). Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Mishra, S. (2007). *Quality assurance in higher education: an introduction*. (Rev. ed.). Bangalore, IN: National Printing Press.

Newton, J. (2012). Is quality assurance leading to enhancement? [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from: http://www.eua.be/Libraries/EQAF_2012/Newton.sflb.ashx

Rayner, P. (2006). Quality: an ideological construct?. Retrieved from: <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://www.aau.edu.et/nprc/Documents/Philip.doc>

Regassa, T., Tolemariam, T., Ferede, B., Bekele, A. and Lemma, A. (2013). Quality of education: the case of Jimma University. *Education*, 3(5), 267-278. Retrieved from: <http://article.sapub.org/pdf/10.5923.j.edu.20130305.03.pdf>

Seyoum, Y. (2011). Revitalizing quality using guidance counselling in Ethiopian HEIs: exploring student's views and attitudes at Haramaya University. *International Journal of Instruction*, 4(2), 161-192.

Retrieved from: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED522688.pdf>

Teferra, D. (2005). Private higher education in Ethiopia: the current landscape. *International Higher Education*, 40, 9-10.

Teichler, U. (2005). Research on higher education in Europe. *European Journal of Education*, 40(4), 447-469.

Tight, M. (2003). *Researching higher education*. The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Saint, W. (2004). Higher education in Ethiopia: the vision and its challenges. *Boston College and Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa*, 2(3), 83-113.

Weldemariam, M. D. (2008). *Higher education quality audit in Ethiopia: analysing the methods and procedures* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from:

<https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/31228/MELAKUTHESES.pdf?sequence=1>

Woldegiorgis, E. T. (2008). *Cost sharing in Ethiopia: an analysis of challenges and prospects* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <http://ria.ua.pt/bitstream/10773/3374/1/2008001474.pdf>

Yizengaw, T. (2007). Implementation of cost sharing in the Ethiopian education landscape: critical assessment and the way forward. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(2), 171-196.