



Higher Education Quality Assessment in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The major objective of this study was analyzing the Ethiopian Higher Education quality assessment model in line with another world. The total 46 key informants were purposively selected from the data sources of this study (Ethiopian public HEIs and the Ministry of Education) and interviewed. Document analysis was another instrument. Using descriptive qualitative research design, data were analyzed in themes qualitatively. Literatures describing the higher education quality assessment models were reviewed. The literature on the models of higher education quality assessment generally tends to converge to the general model of higher education quality assessment and tends to diverge from it while it adds many approaches to the dimensions. It is recommended that the Ethiopian system better to be governed by an independent agency that has strong international linkage, and the system should emphasize the need of stakeholders in quality assurance and assessment. Use of diversified methodologies and existence of explicit standards for resource utilization were recommended. Rigorous interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary peer reviews are strongly recommended in this study.

Keywords

Quality Assessment; Quality Assurance; Quality Control

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Universities over the world face challenges to meet the increasing number of students, providing life-long learning for larger parts of the population, and of dealing with growing student heterogeneity. For this reason, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are required to provide and maintain quality for higher education learning circumstances based on a standard High Education Quality Criteria (Noaman, Ragab, Madbouly, Khedra and Fayoumi, 2015). According to Sarrico, et. al. (2010) HEIs live today in a society where their once privileged situation and the financial commitment to their academic values can no longer be unquestioned. Sarrico, Rosa, Teixeira, and Cardoso (2010) stated this situation has been called ‘the Erosion of Trust’, meaning that the public’s trust in higher education is being lost, which can finally put HEIs at risk.

The main importance of maintaining the quality and privilege of a HEI is also seen in its centrality for economic, political, and social development; its importance to competitiveness in a continuously globalizing knowledge society; and its vitality as an instrument for technological catch-up (El-Khawas, Elaine, 1998; Materu, 2007). Believing this, Ethiopia has been expanding its HEIs, struggling with the question of quality in line with quantity, however.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, fast growth in enrollments amid declining budgets during the 1980s and 1990s, the expansion of private provision of higher education and pressure from a rapidly changing labor market have combined to raise new concerns about quality. As a result, African countries, including Ethiopia, became more conscious of the need for quality improvement (Materu, 2007). As a result of these changes and increased need for accountability, higher education is facing the challenge of re-conceptualizing methods and procedures used to show quality and excellence, including those used for assessing and evaluating the quality of education programmes (Noaman, Ragab, Madbouly, Khedra and Fayoumi, 2015). According to Materu (2007), in Africa, per unit costs amidst rapidly

rising enrollments; brain drain, retirements, and HIV/AIDS; low internal and external efficiency; and poor governance contributed for the decline of higher education quality.

Higher education in Ethiopia has experienced numerous challenges throughout its short history, such as its inability to produce sufficient manpower to meet the country's needs, unresponsiveness of the programmes and the curriculum to the practical needs of the country, the extremely conservative orientation of the institutions, a lack of genuine commitment to academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and scarcity of resources. In addition, maintaining student retention and building academic competencies thereby assuring educational quality has a great pitfall since the universities operate with overcrowded and deteriorating physical facilities, limited and obsolete library resources, insufficient equipment and instructional materials, poorly prepared secondary students, and an absence of academic rigor among students. As a result, the education and training programs provided have not adequately contributed to the alleviation of poverty and other related social problems of Ethiopia (Teshome, 2008; Daniel, 2010; Tesfaye, 2011).

Higher Education Proclamation number 351 (Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Education, 2003: 21) made provision for the creation of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) with the aim of enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education in the country (Kebede, 2014). Since its establishment, HERQA has developed quality assurance systems and introduced the systems for achieving quality education provision. Tesfaye (2011) reported that HEIs assure the quality of educational programs they offer through three mechanisms: internal self- assessment, external review based on the self-assessment and monitoring and follow-up.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

According to Materu (2007), though some attempts to record the developments have been made by different individuals in Africa, no comprehensive mapping and analysis of

quality assurance systems in the region has yet been undertaken. Despite the advances in quality assessment system in Ethiopian HEIs, still, there is a shortage of diverse research findings that use a variety of models to assess the quality of higher education. Studies conducted on assessing the quality of education largely emphasized the description of existing problems and factors that impact the quality of education. For instance, Kebede's (2014) study described the internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in sample universities. The other study, Kahsay's (2012) study, described the general practices of quality assurance in Ethiopian HEIs as related to student learning and achievement. Misgana's (2013) study also assessed the implementation of the quality assurance guidelines of the HERQA in public universities in Ethiopia.

This study analyzes the major internal and external quality assessment mechanisms in Ethiopian HEIs in order to firstly, understand the general trends, similarities, differences, weaknesses, and strengths existing in line with the systems and models of quality assessment discussed in the literature. The gap in the previous studies on quality of Ethiopian HEIs is that they did not bring the examination of different higher education quality assessment models in the world while assessing and investigating the quality assessment practices in Ethiopian HEIs. A review of different higher education quality assessment models in the world helps to identify the gaps that exist in quality assurance practices both nationally and internationally. The rationale behind doing this is to observe how different models view and approach the multifaceted concept of quality in HEIs. The researcher believes that the advantage will be coming up with understanding multiple ways of coping with quality problems in HEIs.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to: 1) Discuss how the internal and external higher education quality assessments are conducted in Ethiopian HEIs, and 2) analyze the

internal and external quality assessment mechanisms in Ethiopian HEIs in line with the general model of quality assessment and quality assessment systems in higher education.

1.4. The Research Questions

The major research questions raised in this study are: 1) How are the internal and external quality assessments conducted in Ethiopian HEIs? 2) How are the elements of the general higher education quality assessment processes being handled in Ethiopia? 3) What are the similarities and differences between higher education quality assessment systems in Ethiopia and another world?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study is believed to give inputs for higher education quality assessment of the country by firstly, bringing different views of higher education quality assessment perspectives and their approach to define and deal with quality issues thereby helping to observe gaps, strengths, and weaknesses. By comparing the Ethiopian higher education quality assessment system with general quality assessment, this study may show how the Ethiopian higher education quality assessment system deviates from an international standard. This study informs the importance of being conscious of the international higher education quality standards and models and utilizing and keeping those standards in order to maintain the real higher education quality; taking into consideration the local and contextual situations to fit one's own conditions and mechanisms. It is believed that the issue of quality higher education is the issue of globalization that binds and networks the quality assurance agencies to bring about the comparable quality higher education in the world.

1.6. Delimitation of the study

The study is delimited to the Ethiopian public HEIs excluding private HEIs because of the time and financial constraints. The variables are quality assurance variables (internal and external quality assurance mechanisms) that are described by university quality assurance officers and HERQA's officers; as well as those mechanisms discussed by different quality assessment systems and the conceptions of the term quality in literature. These variables were revealed through qualitative inquiry and document analysis.

1.7. Theoretical Framework

This study used the general model of quality assessment as a framework and used standards of higher education quality assessment listed by higher education quality assessment networks in the world. Van Vught & Westerheijden (1994) discussed the common general elements of the general model of higher education quality assessment: a) **the managing agency**. They stated that the agency should be free from external influences such as government politics and policies, and not having a mission to impose upon the institutions and should own the sole responsibility to manage the quality assessment system; b) **self-evaluation**. The academics should be able to accept and put the changes into practice; they must acknowledge the ownership of the process in which problems are defined and solutions are designed; c) the third element of the general quality assessment is **peer review**, a site visits by external experts; d) **reporting of the results of the quality assessment along with the methods applied**. These authors asserted that reports should not have the purpose of judging or ranking the HEIs. Rather, their objective should be to help HEIs to enhance their quality. However, approaches in different countries vary in this element. In USA and Canada, the reports are often kept confidential. In France, institutional self-evaluations are kept confidential while the report by external experts is public, and e) **the relationship between the outcomes of a quality review and the governmental decisions about the funding of HEIs**. The authors argued that a direct and rigid relationship between quality assessment reports and funding

decisions damage the operation of the quality assessment system. In general, the main point the authors emphasized is that there should be sound bases for HEIs to keep their important place in community that the model should offer.

The perception of quality assurance is very multidimensional, contextual and a gap exists in the view of professionals in quality assurance, academic staff, and students (Ryan, 2015). Based on a thorough literature review, Lagrosen, Hashemi, and Leitner (2004) have classified the definitions of quality into five major groups: (1) Transcendent definitions, subjective and personal definitions, e.g., beauty and love. (2) Product-based definitions; viewed it as a measurable variable; (3) User-based definitions; a means for customer satisfaction. (4) Manufacturing-based definitions; conformance to requirements and specifications. (5) Value-based definitions; viewed in relation to costs. In Ethiopian context, quality is defined by (MoE/HERQA) as the totality of the University's effectiveness in its core processes and functions to satisfy stakeholder's needs, priorities, and requirements (fitness for purpose); to fulfill requirements of relevance in transforming learners, and to be responsive for accountability purposes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Quality Assurance Methodologies Defined

Throughout quality assurance and assessment systems, different methodologies are used even though the methodologies used in various quality assurance reviews vary considerably, most quality reviews depend on one or a combination of a limited number of key methodologies.

Self-evaluation is the study of institutional activities and practices by members of the respective institution (Kebede, 2014). Craft (2005) defined it as seeing one-self using external support by quality assurance agents; through self-training or self-evaluation staff

development; and using both local and global information regarding performance indicators, descriptions of best practices and new developments in teaching, learning, and assessment.

Accreditation, according to (Kebede, 2014), is the process by which a government or private agent assesses the quality of an institution as a whole or a program in order to formally recognize it as having met certain pre-determined minimum standards or thresholds. Craft (2005) asserted that accreditation assures the academics, the community, and other agents that an institution/programme (1) has clearly stated and educationally relevant objectives, (b) indicates situations under which their achievement can be expected, (c) achieving them substantially, and (d) can be feasible.

Quality audit, according to MoE/HERQA (2006), is a process of review of the university's core process by HERQA or other agency to check that quality and relevance of the programs, curricula, staff infrastructure, and other elements meet the stated objectives and aims of the University and to determine the level of the University's system of quality care and accountability. Craft (2005) defined quality audit as an assessment by a group external to a university to verify that the quality assurance and quality control processes are appropriate and working properly.

Peer review generally involves a visit by a group of well-regarded academics in a particular field to undertake an assessment (Kebede, 2014). Craft (2005) defined peer review as an involvement of people such as active university teachers, researchers, and practicing professionals to offer advice and to make judgments and decisions about proposals for new programmes, the continuation and modification of existing programmes, the quality of research programmes or the quality of institutions.

In defining **quality assurance**, different definitions are used by different countries. MoE/HERQA (2006) defined quality assurance as planned, systematic, structured,

continuous review and evaluation of all programs, courses, instructional materials, teaching, learning, assessment at the university with the purpose of maintaining and improving these through continuous quality care efforts; and confirming the conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by the University and relevant national bodies. World Bank (2013) stated that ‘quality assurance’ refers to planned and systematic processes that provide confidence in educational services provided by training providers under the remit of relevant authorities.

Quality Control is defined as a system by which an enterprise checks whether the raw materials it uses, the product it makes, or the service it provides reach minimum pre-defined (threshold) standards so that the sub-standard can be rejected. Mostly, this is done on a sampling basis by a group of controllers or inspectors, who are independent of the main workforce, and who have powers to reject sub-standard products or services. Quality control is not sufficed. The overall quality of a university must be the concern of everyone who works there. This leads us to quality assurance (Craft, 2005).

Van Vught & Westerheijden (1994) defined **quality assessment** as external reviews of and judgments about the quality of teaching and learning in institutions. MoE/HERQA (2006) also defined quality assessment as a periodic review and evaluation of programs, courses, instructional materials, teaching-learning, and outcomes based on the BPR (Business Process Re-engineering) requirements.

2.2. Historical Roots of Quality Assessment in HEIs: The Medieval Higher Education

Van Vught & Westerheijden (1994) discussed the roots of quality assessment as it is summarized as follows:

French model. The authors stated that, in medieval France, Universities were seen as ecclesiastical colonies. For this reason, the delegate of the bishop of Paris, a chancellor above the masters' guild, had the power to grant or withhold the teaching license and to decide contents of the study. This model is considered to be the archetype of quality assessment in terms accountability.

English model of self-governance. The authors also stated that, in medieval England, the masters were independent of external jurisdiction. These fellows had the right to judge the quality of their colleagues. The masters decided what to teach and how to teach. Today's expression of what we call peer review was applied.

The authors asserted that these two systems can be considered to be important dimensions of any present-day system of quality assessment in higher education. These two systems refer to the two general concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. Intrinsic qualities refer to the ideals of the search for truth and the pursuit of knowledge while extrinsic qualities refer to the services higher education gives to outside community. By combining both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities, HEIs have been able to show a remarkable historical persistence.

2.3. The Recent Developments in Higher Education Quality Assessment

According to Van Vught & Westerheijden (1994), since the early 1980's, quality assessment in higher education has become a central concept in USA and Canada, UK, France, Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Spain and other European countries.

They stated that the factors that explained this recent increase of the attention for quality in higher education are: 1) expansion of higher education systems, a rapid increase of student body, and fields of study and whole new institutions triggered questions about the amount and direction of public expenditure for higher education. 2) The public

expenditures reached in the countries and the budget cuts and retrenchments 3) Shifting process to technology-based economies leading students to the fields important for economic development. The authors stated that in previous decades especially extrinsic values of higher education have driven countries to policies of quality control in higher education. As a result, new systems and mechanisms of quality assessment control have been being developed in several countries.

Experiences in USA and Canada. In the USA, the system is market-oriented and competition between HEIs was generally accepted. Government control was limited compared with continental Europe. The diversity in institutional forms and initial lack of centrally defined standards in the 19thc created controversies in the US higher education. As a result, the institutions took the initiative to develop two processes of quality assessment: accreditation and the intra-institutional process of systematic review of study programmes (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994).

Developments in Western Europe. The authors also stated that except Britain, in many countries in Western Europe, HEIs were state-controlled and government funded. However, during 1970's and 1980's, the Western European higher education systems encountered far-reaching changes. Due to shifts in governmental strategies, the value for money approach was emphasized. As a result, funding linked to the performance of HEIs and quality of higher education became one of the central issues.

The second development in higher education policymaking in Western Europe according to the authors was the rise of the government strategy of 'self-regulation', resulting in increased autonomy and competitiveness among HEIs. From these developments described above, new attempts to set up quality assessment systems arose in some western European countries.



France. The authors stated that in France, the traditional, centralized system of quality control ended and the Comite National d'evaluation (CNE) established. The CNE has two parts: institution-wide evaluation and horizontal disciplinary reviews.

The United Kingdom. The authors stated that since the first half of the 1960's non-university HE quality was evaluated by Council of National Academic Awards (CNAA) and controlled by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). CNAA is government initiated, and independent which evaluated and validated polytechnic courses. It was ceased to exist in 1992. In mid-1980's, Reynold's report laid down criteria for internal quality management systems for universities while the Jarratt report announced the discussion of performance indicators and their role in quality-based learning. In the years 1990-1991, the Academic Audit Unit (AAU) was introduced by the organization Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) to counter the HMI. After its introduction, CVCP consisted of external examiners. AAU evaluated the quality of institutions' evaluation methods.

According to the authors, changes following the 1991 white paper brought about changes in organizational structures and have led to the introduction of the specific meanings to the following terms in Britain context: 1) **Quality control** - Mechanisms within institutions for maintaining and enhancing the quality of their provision; 2) **Quality audit** - External scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place, and 3) **Quality assessment** - External reviews of and judgments about the quality of teaching and learning in institutions (responsibility of funding councils).



3. Methodology

3.1. Study Design

The study design used in this study was descriptive qualitative research design. The interview responses were interpreted and qualitatively discussed. All public universities in Ethiopia were the population of the study. The sample design used in this study was non-probability sampling in which the key informants were purposively selected and interviewed. The total 46 key participants from HERQA and HEIs: 6 respondents from HERQA and the other 40 respondents from the six universities those purposively selected for the study. 8 participants from each university were participated in the study.

3.2. Data Collection Tools

The semi-structured interviews and document analysis were the major tools used for data collection. The 11 interview questionnaires were developed by the researcher and administered to the key informants. The questionnaires were organized in themes and the responses were collected and organized in these themes. During the interview, the responses of the participants were recorded by writing in the notebook. Regarding the document analysis, HERQA documents were downloaded from their website (<http://www.higher.edu.et>) and the other university documents were downloaded from their websites. The respondents show and gave the available documents at their office and the researcher observed and recorded the needed data.

4. Data Presentation, Discussion and Interpretation

4.1. Quality Assessment in Ethiopian HEIs

Until 2003, the issue of quality was missing both in the Ministry of Education (MOE) and HEIs (Abebaw and Aster, 2012). It is after 2003 that higher education quality issue has got due attention by the Ethiopian government. Supporting this, Abebaw and Aster (2012)

stated that the government of Ethiopia gave a due acknowledgment for higher education quality in 2003 by ratifying the higher education Proclamation and establishing the agency in charge of higher education relevance and quality. HERQA was established through the HEP (351/2003, Article 78) as an autonomous legal body to supervise the relevance and quality of higher education offered by HEIs. In addition, following this establishment of HERQA, a couple of pilot external quality assessments were conducted in one private college and one governmental university in the 2005 academic year. Later on, a large-scale quality audit was conducted in the relatively older nine public universities. As well, the HEP number 650/2009 has given directions to the higher education sector in the country by formulating improved policy and mandating structural changes (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2009, as cited in Tefera, 2014).

Internal quality assessment. According to the interview with the HERQA expert and the sample universities' quality assurance officers, the major internal quality assessment mechanism used is self-assessment. The officers stated that the self-assessment is done in two forms. The first form of self-assessment is done in the form of institutional continuous self-assessments of the functions of the institutions, such as timely teacher evaluations, yearly staff evaluations done at the department level, faculty level and university level. In this type of self-evaluation, the staff evaluates each other in aspects of the teaching-learning process, management, community service and security of the campus. The second form of self-assessment is the overall self-assessment process aimed at assessing the institution's strength, weakness, opportunities, and threats. This self-assessment is guided by the ten focal areas of the quality assessment in HEIs. As it is stated in HERQA (QA05/06/V1, 2006) self-evaluation takes the following Procedures: a) Establishing a team for the self-evaluation; b) Compiling and communicating a timetable for the self-evaluation; c) Gathering and analyzing information for self-evaluation; d) Reporting the self-evaluation, and e) Making use of the self-evaluation.

External quality assessment. Generally, Ethiopia uses two external quality assessment mechanisms in HEIs: quality audit and institutional/program accreditation. There is a tendency towards “accreditation of program and institution” in the private and “institutional audit” in both public and private HEIs (HERQA experts; HEIs quality assurance officers; and Abebaw and Aster, 2012).

Quality audit. A HERQA institutional quality audit assesses the appropriateness and effectiveness of HEIs’s systems of accountability and quality assurance and of its internal review mechanisms (HERQA QA05/06/V1, 2006). Craft (1992) also stated that external quality assessment is never an end in itself, but rather an extension of internal quality control. Abebayehu said that until now the auditing is done for first, second and third generation universities and as evidence, he showed the researcher the published materials of quality audits of the universities. In addition, Addis Ababa University quality assurance officer also told the researcher that quality auditing had been accomplished and the reports have been published after discussing with the concerned officials of the university. He said that depending on the recommendations, the action plan is prepared and weaknesses are improved. Addis Ababa University Science and Technology University and Wachemo University quality assurance directorates also said that they have already finished the self-evaluation process as they had been instructed by HERQA and they were going to submit the self-evaluation document to HERQA. As it is stated in HERQA QA05/06/V1 (2006) and the interview with the expert at HERQA, institutional quality audit proceeds through the following steps: a) HEI carries out an institutional self-evaluation and prepares a Self Evaluation Document. b) HEI sends HERQA its Self Evaluation Document and informs HERQA of their wish to have an institutional quality audit; c) HERQA and HEI agree a date for the institutional quality audit; d) HERQA establishes an external institutional quality audit team in consultation with the HEI; e) HERQA institutional quality auditors make a one-day briefing visit to the HEI; f) HERQA institutional quality audit team makes a four-day institutional quality audit visit

to the HEI; g) HERQA issues a quality audit report; and h) HEI prepares an action plan to enhance quality and relevance. According to the interview response, **HERQA institutional quality audit covers the following ten focus areas: 1) Vision, Mission, and Educational Goals; 2) Governance and Management System; 3) Infrastructure and Learning Resources; 4) Academic and Support Staff; 5) Student Admission and Support Services; 6) Program Relevance and Curriculum; 7) Teaching, Learning, and Assessment; 8) Student Progression and Graduate Outcomes; 9) Research and Outreach Activities, and 10) Internal Quality Assurance.**

Accreditation. According to the HERQA expert, HERQA is authorized to accredit the private HEIs and it is also recently given a mandate of accrediting public distance programmes. Regarding accreditation in Ethiopian Public HEIs, the type of accreditation used is internal accreditation. Internal accreditation is defined by Abebaw and Aster (2012) as the establishment or of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of a study program where departments and faculties seek the establishment or legitimacy of a new study program from the responsible body of the institution. Since the study programs are not accredited by HERQA, it is the mandate of the HEIs to internally accredit their study programmes with joint consultation from external study program experts that come to make a programme review.

Generally, the internal accreditation follows this procedure: Firstly, the department level curriculum committee writes a draft study program in line with the legislation and the Higher Education Proclamation. After that, an application that consists of a brief overview of the program is prepared by the department. Secondly, the application is submitted to the faculty of the department for evaluation. If comments come from the faculty, the department examines the comments and resends them to the faculty. If the faculty understands the program significantly relevant, it transfers the document and its comments to the institution's Academic Program Office. Thirdly, after discussing with the faculty and the department, the Academic Program Office invites other institutions for

external review. The Academic Program Office arranges a conference where external reviewers present and discuss the result review results. Next, the Academic Program Office sends feedbacks given by the external reviewer to the department for reconsideration. Finally, if the Academic Program Office finds the suggestions given by the external reviewers are properly defended by the department, it presents the documents to Academic Standards and Curriculum Review Committee of the Senate for the final decision. In Ethiopia, internal accreditation is mandatory for starting of every new degree program. On the other hand, programs can be adopted from other institutions and can be started without passing through "internal accreditation" process and can equally function with the internally accredited ones (Abebaw and Aster, 2012).

Peer Reviews. According to the interview with the respondents, external peer reviewers come from different organizations for the purpose of sharing experiences and evaluating the programmes. In addition to universities, they come from NGOs such as SIDA, UNESCO, World Bank, etc. These peers share their experience in their special areas they find in the universities being and cooperating with the specialists in the programmes. This is facilitated by the quality assurance office of the university.

4.2. Comparison of the Sets of Standards of Quality Assurance of HERQA with World Quality Assurance Networks' Standards

A bulk of literature in the world reveals that agencies in the world have their own sets of standards of both internal and external quality assurance. These standards help them as a guideline in all functioning of quality assurance, assessment, and control. These sets of standards are published and publicly known so that every stakeholder knows its constituents. Therefore, in this part, the Ethiopian quality assurance sets of both internal and external quality assurance standards were compared depending on the comparative study of Aelterman (2006). This author compared these quality assurance networks

depending on the specific standards they listed. These networks are European Association for Quality Assurance in higher education (ENQA, 2005), European Consortium for Accreditation in higher education (ECA, 2004), International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in higher education (INQAAHE, 2005), Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN, 2006), The OECD–UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border higher education (OECD, 2005) and The Member Code of Good Practice of the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA, 1995). The comparison was made under the following themes and this study also used these themes to analyze HERQA’s quality assurance standards:

Mission and Statement. When the Ethiopian quality assurance document is compared with these quality assurance network standards, we observe that the mission statement is stated in the quality assurance document (i.e. in the focal areas and in the policy documents).

The relationship between Agency and HEIs. Regarding this, the relationship between agency and HEIs in the process of quality assurance is stated in the policy documents as a democratic relationship in which the institutions can take the responsibility of assessing and managing their own quality assurance system and non-domination of the external evaluators is encouraged and stated. Therefore, the relationship in practice, according to the respondents from HEIs, is not somewhat the agency dominating the HEIs. However, some respondents stated that HERQA instructs the HEIs to do things hurriedly during auditing within short time resulting in shallow assessment results.

Decision Making. It is explicitly discussed in the quality audit report document that, after the quality audit is accomplished depending on the self-evaluation of the institutions, the final checking and discussions with the HEIs are done before publishing the report. However, regarding the share of decisions in the quality assessment outcome, decision making between government (MOE) and HERQA, an explicit guideline is not written as

far as my knowledge is concerned. Some of the respondents said that the decision making of HERQA is largely affected by MOE.

Public Eye. It is explicitly stated in the quality audit report and Quality Assurance policy documents that the report of the outcomes of quality assessments is done to the public using different Medias. The quality audit report is published and the documents are sent to the HEIs, MOE, House of People's Representatives and other concerned offices.

Documentation. It is stated in the QA policy document (No. 6) that there is appropriate archiving used and the intranet system is used to appropriately document the quality assessment processes.

Resources. No standard is set externally although the resource utilization of a university is assumed to be assessed as it is indicated in the focal area document (No.3). Explicit standards for the resource should be there at the policy level, external quality assurance agency (HERQA) and HEIs level.

Appeal. Although the process of appealing comments by the stakeholders is not discussed in detail, some general statement is written in the Equal Opportunity Document of HERQA. There should be explicit and detailed procedures for appealing the comments in order to cultivate the culture of ownership of the HEIs in the stakeholders. The voices of the stakeholders should be heard and their problems should be solved democratically if the real quality is to be expected.

External Review of the Agency. The process in which the HERQA conducts the quality audit of HEIs is explicitly discussed in the quality audit process document of HERQA and preparations and things may be made by HEIs before and during the external review is clearly stated in the documents.

Collaboration with other Agencies. The quality policy document of HERQA (No. 4) stated that HERQA makes a network with local and international Quality Assurance agencies, especially with INQAAHE. However, according to the response from HERQA's expert (Ato Ababayehu), there is less linkage with the external world as only one UK national is working in the HERQA office by his own will. This may be one of the weaknesses of Ethiopian quality assurance system. Networks listed above have their own strong linkages and many agencies are included in them. In Africa, this linkage seems at an infant stage as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA, 2017) is currently under draft version for consultation.

Official Status. The official statute which delineates the power of HERQA as an independent agency from third parties is absent. This makes the HERQA somewhat powerless as a quality assurance agent in HEIs. What is written in the higher education proclamation is HERQA duties and responsibilities in the accreditation and quality assurance process of private HEIs.

4.3. Analyzing Ethiopian Quality Assessment system in line with the General Model in Higher Education Institutions

Managing agent of the quality assessment of Quality Assessment system. This dimension of the general quality assessment model deals with the independence of quality assessment system from external influences, the agent's level of legality and accreditation and the adequacy and formality of its information of procedures and formats that can be used by the institution.

According to the interview with Mr. Ababayehu Terefe, Quality Audit and Enhancement expert at HERQA, the Agency's stated mission is 'to ensure a high quality and relevant higher education system in Ethiopia.' Its operational objectives include: a) Assessing the

relevance and quality of higher education; b) ensuring that the curriculum supports the country's development needs; c) Providing an efficient and transparent accreditation system, and d) Disseminating information regarding standards and programmes.

To compare with this, Billing (2004) summarized the surveys from 38 countries, stated that the purposes of external quality assurance appear to be variants of a mix of the same functions, which can be boiled down to a) improvement of quality, b) publicly available information on quality and standards, c) accreditation, (i.e. legitimization of certification of students), d) public accountability: for standards achieved, and for use of money, and e) to contribute to the higher education sector planning process.

HERQA's expert stated that since the agency functions under the ministry of education, it is semi-autonomous. For instance, he said, the authority to accredit the public HEIs is not given for HEQRA (HERQA accredits mainly private HEIs), although HERQA is recently authorized to accredit the public distance higher education programmes. In addition, there is no documentation such as legislative acts or statutes of the organization that stipulates the independence of the agency's work from third parties such as HEIs, government or other stakeholder organizations. For this reason, the decisions of HERQA over higher education quality issues are shared by MOE.

Self- assessment in the quality assessment system. It is argued in the quality assessment literature in HEIs that in order for the academics to accept and implement changes they must trust and own the process in which problems are defined and solutions are designed (Van Vught, &Westerheijden, 1994).

Regarding this, Mr. Abebayehu and others officers stated that there are explicit and formal procedures by which the institutions make self-evaluations. At the first place, every institution has its own quality assurance officers who are responsible for all quality assurance activities. Self-assessment of the institutions is accomplished before quality

auditing conducted by the agency, and the agency gives the appropriate training on the self-evaluation procedures. Then, using their own ways, the HEIs are given freedom to conduct self-evaluation following the written system and guidelines by the agency. However, some respondents said that the self-evaluation is done hurriedly and gives less information on the real quality of the institutions.

In the Senate Legislation of the sample universities, the quality assurance committee duties and responsibilities were observed in this study. The duties and responsibilities of quality assurance bodies are clearly stated in the legislation of the sample universities. Generally, what is listed in the legislation documents of the universities regarding the quality assurance is the general description of the processes of program review, curriculum review, course review, issues on class size, quality assurance, assessment, and auditing issues. The inclusion of different committees from different offices of the university as committee members in the quality assurance committee is an evidence that the universities gave due attention to the quality assurance of their institutions.

Mechanisms of peer review and site visits by external experts. The quality assurance officers said that external experts come from other universities to their universities for different purposes such as experience sharing and for program reviews. Experts also come from different NGOs to get information and make a review of the area they need and to give different assistance, training, etc., depending on their evaluations.

However, the researcher understands from the responses and his readings that peer review methodology has still a shortage of effective guidelines and mechanisms and its application is not to the required standards in Ethiopian HEIs. For instance, in other world universities, according to my readings, peer reviewers do a lot of jobs in quality assessment of the study programmes and others. These peer reviewers are free from any biases and influences compared with the experts from the agency and the validity of their assessment results are high. From experience of USA, Israel, and UK we also learn that

peer review dominates the quality assessment process and its value is high in terms of validity and cost. Peer reviewers are experts in the specific fields compared with agency officers who come to conduct the quality audit. The number of experts at HERQA is small and to compensate this shortage of manpower, the use of external experts from other countries and in the country to assess quality is the best mechanism.

Reporting of the quality assessment results. A report should not have the function of judging or ranking the institutions or programs that have been visited. It rather should target at helping HEIs and study programs to improve their levels of quality. A crucial phase in the reporting process, therefore, concerns providing the opportunities to the HEIs to comment on the draft version of the report and to formulate counter-arguments, if necessary (Van Vught, & Westerheijden, 1994). In this element, approaches in different countries differ. According to the interview responses from HERQA expert and sample universities officers the main objectives of reporting are: 1) supporting the HEIs improve their mechanism of self-evaluation 2) Showing the achievements and strengths to concerned and forwarding recommendations and implications as well as helping the HEIs to be satisfied and proud of their achievements and open the way of looking at their own weaknesses and improving it. However, some respondents said that reports are being used to rank the universities in Ethiopia and the criteria used to rank the universities lack clarity and validity. For instance, Tefera (2014) illustrated that the institutions are distracted from the real work of quality improvement by the emerging domestic annual ranking of universities, which is the quality assurance showcase of the Ethiopian higher education system, positively deceiving institutions into thinking that they are performing well.

The Relationship between quality assessment results and funding. Van Vught, & Westerheijden (1994) argued that a direct, rigid relationship between quality review reports and funding decisions should not be established because such a relationship harms the operation of the quality assessment system. The respondents also said that as a result

of the results of the quality assessment, there is no funding difference done for universities by the government. Results of quality assessment are absolutely aimed at helping universities improve themselves. However, as a result of the evaluation result reports to the public, said the respondents, the universities' internal income, and privilege can negatively or positively be affected.

Resources. According to the respondents and HERQA expert, resource constraint is the major problem in Ethiopian HEIs quality assurance at this time. The shortage of human, material, and financial resources is the setbacks of Ethiopian HEIs quality assurance, said the respondents. For instance, HERQA expert responded that “at this time, at the agency level, there are only eight experts. When we compare this number of experts with the number of HEIs to be evaluated, it is mismatching. It is with this little number of human resources that we are trying to work with many private and public HEIs. Not only is the shortage of number, but also there is a shortage of experience and qualification”. There is also a shortage of international experts in the agency; only one UK citizen who is currently working in the agency in his own willingness.

Regarding this issue, El-Khawas, Elaine H. (1998), in describing the World Bank’s report, stated that the report found that developing countries were particularly hard hit by the crisis in higher education. These authors also asserted that the fiscal constraints faced by many countries, coupled with increasing demand, has led to overcrowding, deteriorating infrastructure, lack of resources for non-salary expenditures, such as textbooks and laboratory equipment, and a decline in the quality of teaching and research activities. Based on a review of countries’ experience, the World Bank report, said the authors, suggested four key directions for reform: a) encouraging greater differentiation of institutions, b) Providing incentives for HEIs to diversify sources of funding, c) Redefining the role of government in higher education, and d) Introducing policies explicitly designed to give priority to quality and equity objectives.

Cyclical external review of Agency. The expert at the agency said that they planned to conduct the quality auditing of the HEIs every five years, but they practically do not do it right at five years- it may take longer due to the shortage of manpower and material resources.

5. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1. Discussion

In this section using different kinds of literature the results of the analysis are discussed - especially different approaches to quality assessment in different countries are compared with Ethiopia's higher education quality assessment system. In addition, the major findings are forwarded and recommendations are given.

Weber, Mahfooz, & Kate (2010) used four criteria listed below to systematically analyze a range of country quality assurance systems. They were: 1) The object and nature (formative or summative) of evaluation; 2) The relative role of HEIs, agencies, and governments; 3) The consequences and impact of decisions and/or recommendations, and 4) The costs of HEI quality assurance systems in relation to the expected benefits. The quality assurance system in public HEIs of Ethiopia follows formative (that is, encourage institutions to identify their own strengths and deficiencies and develop plans to address the problems and to improve their weaknesses). Here, when we interpret Ethiopia's system depending on the data, the role of the agency over public HEIs can be interpreted as a medium because the role of agency over public HEIs is shared by the MOE. Those systems which use summative approaches of quality assurance have the higher role of agencies over themselves.

Concerning the next criteria used to compare the HEIs, which is the relative role of the government over agencies, in Ethiopia's case, the role of government over HEIs can be interpreted as equal to agency's role because especially the final decisions of the quality evaluation results made by agencies are affected by the MOE. The next criteria by which

the systems were compared are the consequences and impact of decisions and/or recommendations. In Ethiopia, it can be understood that the consequences and impact of decisions and/or recommendations are medium for public HEIs. Regarding this a quality assurance expert at HERQA stated that after auditing, the strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations are reported to the universities and the time interval in which they can improve the weaknesses are made known by the universities. If the universities repeatedly fail to improve the weaknesses, they are reported to the MOE and MOE takes its measures.

The cost of HEI quality assurance systems in relation to the expected benefits is next criterion. The analysis indicated that EUA system needs the lowest cost to achieve its quality assessment goals than others. The more the HEIs are responsible for their own quality assurance processes being free from the influences of others, the less energy they lose to achieve the expected objectives because quality assurance in higher education is a matter of making each and every member of the university responsible and owner of the university. Then, everybody works to assure the quality at a lower cost. In the case of Ethiopian system, according to the responses from the respondents, quality assurance issue is costly in terms of the readiness and responsibility of the university community and stakeholders to take care of the quality of higher education. Regarding this, Jeliaskova and Westerheijden (1998) stated that the ability to relate the quality with the cost it expends is determined by the maturity level of the university; the highly qualified HEIs tend to assess themselves in relation to the cost they need to achieve the stated objectives.

There are international similarities and differences in quality assurance models, in the following dimensions: 1) the concept of quality 2) objectives of the Quality Assurance system; 3) the methodologies; 4) the responsible agent; 5) type of participation, i.e., voluntary or compulsory; 6) emphasis on research or teaching, or both of them; 7) emphasis on programme reviews, disciplines, or the whole university; 8) confidentially or

publicity of reporting (with/without grading); 9) type of follow-up activities and 10) The use of or not use of Quality Assurance results for decisions such as funding, accreditation etc. (Billing, 2004).

Billing (2004) added some points to the Van Vught & Westerheijden's (1994) general model of higher education quality assurance framework used in this study. These points were the importance of transparency of external processes, of internal quality care in the institutions, and of a follow-up process after the report. Depending on several studies, Billing (2004) considered that national external Quality Assurance frameworks were converging internationally. The features converged upon are discussed above (i.e., the model used in this study including those points added by Vroeijenstijn, 1995), plus: a) effective Quality Assurance processes internal to the HEI; b) support of self-evaluation by standard quantitative data on effectiveness of performance; c) distinctions between the level of aggregation evaluated, which may be programme, subject, department/faculty or institution.

In addition, El-Khawas, Elaine H. (1998), stated that despite the continuity of policy debates, some commonalities have emerged around an approach to quality assurance for higher education. This convergence indicates a broad cultural "borrowing" among countries. These common features converged were, according to these authors, are: a) semi-autonomous agents/agencies; b) explicit standards; c) self-study by the academic institution; d) external peer-reviews; e) written recommendations; f) public reporting and g) attention to process or capacity and results.

5.2. Conclusion

Both internal and external quality assessment mechanisms are being implemented in Ethiopian HEIs. In addition, formative and summative approaches to quality assurance

mechanisms are being used complementarily in the system. The major external quality assessment currently used to assess the quality of HEIs are quality audit (for both public and private HEIs) accreditation (especially for private HEIs). Other quality assessment methodologies such as self-evaluation, peer reviews, and site visits are also used. The analysis of the quality assessment framework in Ethiopian HEIs against the general quality assessment model in this study revealed the Ethiopian quality assurance agency is semi-autonomous. In addition, the role of the agency on HEIs is a medium since this role is shared with the MOE. Self-assessment is a widely used quality assessment method – in this case, it conforms to the general quality assessment model. Despite the fact that peer review is used in Ethiopian system, this study reveals that it is not used to the standard. The literature shows that peer review is used for multi-purposes in different ways. The outcomes of quality assessment in Ethiopian system are published and reported to the stakeholders using appropriate methodologies and procedures. There is no direct relationship between funding and public higher education quality assessment outcomes. However, it is inevitable that the results of the quality assessment which are published and reported to the public bring about a direct impact on the internal income and privilege of the HEIs. The cyclical quality review in Ethiopian HEIs is not done as planned because of resource constraints.

The major setback for quality assessment in Ethiopian HEIs is the found to be a shortage of both human and financial resource. The weak ties and networks the agency has with the international quality assurance agencies also can bring about a lag behind in keeping the international standards because the system may be in devoid of funding, a share of knowledge and practice from international agents. In addition, the analysis of the models of higher education quality assessment reveals that the more HEIs are free from influences and responsible for their quality (more mature, in other words), the more effective and less costly the quality assessment system. Compared with the international quality agencies and networks' standards of quality assurance set by HERQA, although

the documents have full contents of the standards, the standards are not clearly and explicitly stated in such a way that they can be used to assess the internal and external higher education quality clearly and objectively. Studies confirm that even though making the internal quality assurance agents more responsible and accountable for higher education quality assurance is preferred internationally, the governments are losing trust in internal quality assurance personnel. For this reason, the attention is highly given to other stakeholders (students, employers) on one hand and the outcomes of the higher education on the other hand.

5.3. Recommendation

Depending on the analysis of the data and review of the literature and the findings of the study, the following recommendations were forwarded: 1) This study suggests the quality assessment agent (HERQA) independent from government and other third-party influences on the work of quality assessment and decisions; 2) It is recommended that peer review should be effectively used for quality assessment, for example, external experts (both national and international) can be invited to make a review; 3) This study also recommends that larger number of experts should be trained in quality assessment to supply the adequate number of human resource. These experts should also be a mix of national and international experts in order to share the experiences in the area. 4) The diversified methodologies are recommended to be used in quality assessment in HEIs (experience from the USA). Rigorous specific programme reviews and interdisciplinary reviews that are done by internal and external experts in the field is found to be more effective and better be used; 5) The quality assurance assessment should be highly depended on satisfying the needs of stakeholders; 6) The culture of cultivating the ownership in the university community and other stakeholders for the quality issues is the effective method; 7) The process of quality assurance should base itself on outcomes of higher education and the emphasis should be given to changes o students' learning and

changes in economy; and 8) This study also recommends that further studies using different methodologies should be conducted in the Ethiopian higher education quality assessment especially in the areas of specific models of higher education quality assessment as related to outcomes of HEIs.

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