Session 3-1

Perceived Impacts of the First External Quality Audits Carried out in Ethiopian Public and Private Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The formal introduction of the QA regime in Ethiopia dates nearly a decade back when the practice was legally institutionalized and the establishment of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) was heralded through the first Higher Education Proclamation of 2003. On the basis of the systems and structures created since then, HERQA has managed to carry out external quality audits in different phases, the first one of which was undertaken on nine public and five private institutions from 2007-2009. The findings of this national initiative were published and made available to the government and the wider public. Although both HERQA and audited institutions claim to have benefited a lot from this exercise, no research has been done so far to delve into and outline the actual benefits obtained and the challenges encountered. This research attempted to fill this void by exploring the actual benefits and effects of the external quality audit carried out with the following major objectives:

(a) To identify what institutions perceive to be the impacts and challenges of the external quality audits carried out by HERQA;
(b) To identify what HERQA considers as the major effects and challenges of the external quality audits it carried out; and
(c) To see if there is any congruence between what institutions and HERQA perceive as impacts and challenges.

The major findings of the study and the lessons learnt are discussed on the basis of qualitative & quantitative data gathered and derived implications.

Having been established in 2003 as a quality watch-dog, the Ethiopian Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) has spearheaded national efforts in the accreditation and quality assurance of the higher education sector. Among such efforts is the external quality audit practice it initiated in 2007. In its first external quality assessment which took two years to complete, HERQA managed to audit 9 public and 5 private institutions. The results indicated that, by and large, the Ethiopian higher education sector is at its nascent stage and requires significant improvements before it claims to be a guarantor of quality education. The major findings that came out in the publications of HERQA (2009) after its first external audit are:

- The lack of clear and well-established system of quality management in most of the public and private institutions audited;
- The absence of quality management units in most of the institutions audited;
- The unavailability of quality assurance policies at institutional level;
- Lack of awareness among some university staff about quality considerations and HERQA's expectations;
- Misunderstandings and confusions about quality assurance concepts and practices at various levels of the university system.

The above are clear indications of the hurdles Ethiopian HEIs face in terms of institutionalizing a quality management system that should allow them to meet the challenges of an ever expanding higher education sector. Notwithstanding the above, the demand from HERQA and the government continue to emphasize that the only available route for higher education institutions (HEIs) is to realize their existing weakness and work towards improving their system of quality management. The Higher Education Proclamation the government issued in 2009, for instance, stipulates that HEIs, should "provide for clear and comprehensive measures of quality covering professional development of academic staff, course contents, teaching-learning processes, student evaluation, and assessment and grading systems". (HEP 2009: Article 22.2). In addition, HEIs are expected, as per the provisions of the Proclamation, to comply with the requirements given by HERQA with regard to their quality enhancement efforts.

After the 2007-2009 external quality audits and the continuing demands of the government, there seems to be a growing realization that HEIs are doing their best to get their house in order. HERQA's management feel that there is a gradual change in terms of the quality culture being created as attested by the behavior of an increasing number of institutions that are vigorously working towards improving their quality management systems (Wondwosen 2012). HEIs also claim that the external quality audit HERQA carried out had a lot of benefits in terms of responding to the demands of the agency and the government with regard to the provision of quality education. These claims, however, have not been substantiated with empirical findings that show how and in what specific areas the external quality audit carried out by HERQA has been useful in improving the quality management system being created anew in the higher education sector. Hence the need for this study.

The study used both questionnaires and interview as major sources of data collection. HERQA as an institution and all the 14 institutions that were audited from 2007-2009 were taken as samples of the study. The external quality audit reports published were also used as secondary sources of data.

Preliminary findings of the study indicate that the preparation towards the external

quality audit and the findings of the audit have been beneficial to institutions in terms of reflecting on their current practices and improving their mode of operation. The Enhancement Plan HERQA demanded from HEIs after its external audit and its supervisory follow up have also been regarded as additional measures that impinge on the quality improvement trajectory HEIs claim to be experiencing after the audit. The overall findings of the research indicate that HEIs perceive a substantial positive impact of the external quality audit exercise implanted in the Ethiopian higher education sector since 2008. The full research report identifies specific areas of importance and challenges together with their implications.

I.   Introduction: Background and Objectives of the Paper

The formal introduction of the QA regime in Ethiopia dates nearly a decade back when the practice was legally institutionalized and the establishment of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) was heralded through the first Higher Education Proclamation of 2003. The demand from HERQA and the government emphasize that higher education institutions (HEIs) need to work towards improving their system of quality management. The Higher Education Proclamation the government issued in 2009, for instance, stipulates that HEIs, should "provide for clear and comprehensive measures of quality covering professional development of academic staff, course contents, teaching-learning processes, student evaluation, and assessment and grading systems" (HEP 2009: Article 22.2). In addition, HEIs are expected, as per the provisions of the Proclamation, to comply with the requirements given by HERQA with regard to their quality enhancement efforts.

On the basis of the systems and structures created, HERQA has since its establishment managed to carry out external quality audits in different phases, the first one of which was undertaken on nine public and five private institutions from 2007-2009. The findings of this national initiative were published and made available to the government and the wider public. After this exercise, there seems to be a growing realization that HEIs are doing their best to get their house in order. HERQA's management feel that there is a gradual change in terms of the quality culture being created as attested by the behavior of an increasing number of institutions that are vigorously working towards improving their quality management systems (Wondwosen 2012). HEIs also claim that the external quality audit HERQA carried out had a lot of benefits in terms of responding to the demands of the agency and the government with regard to the provision of quality education. These claims, however, have not been substantiated with empirical findings that show how and in what specific areas the external quality audit carried out by HERQA has been useful in improving the quality management system being created anew in the higher education sector. Hence the need for this study which explores the perceived benefits, effects and challenges of the first external quality audit carried out in Ethiopia with the following major objectives:

(a) To identify what institutions perceive to be the impacts and challenges of the external quality audits carried out by HERQA;

(b) To identify what HERQA considers as the major effects and challenges of the external quality audits it carried out; and

(c) To see if there is any congruence between what institutions and HERQA perceive as impacts and challenges.

The study used both questionnaires and interview as major sources of data collection. HERQA as an institution and all the 14 institutions that were audited from 2007-2009 were taken as samples of the study. The external quality audit reports of institutions published by HERQA were also used as secondary sources of data. The major findings of the study and the lessons learnt are discussed on the basis of qualitative and quantitative data gathered. Derived implications are also offered at the end.

The paper is structured in three major sections. The first part discusses the major features of higher education in Ethiopia and the manners in which external quality audit is carried out. This is followed by a section that presents the major findings of the external quality audit as evidenced in the major quality audit reports published by HERQA. The third part dwells on the findings obtained from the questionnaires distributed and the interviews held followed by the conclusions of the paper.

II. Higher Education and External Quality Audit in Ethiopia

Ethiopia cherishes a long history of church education, though modern education only started by the opening in 1908 of Menilik II School (now Menilik II Secondary School). Higher education was initiated half a century later with the creation of Trinity College (now Addis Ababa University) which was founded in 1949.

The Ethiopian education system comprises eight years of primary education (with two cycles each having four years); four years of secondary education (divided as general secondary and senior secondary or preparatory with two years each); 2-3 years of TVET/ Teacher Education; 3-5 years of undergraduate studies; and 2-4 years of post-graduate studies.

Ethiopia follows a two-tier system of post-secondary education. Up to diploma level (or Levels I-V in the case of technical and vocational education) trainings are given by teacher education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions while undergraduate degree programs and above are offered by higher education institutions (HEIs). The status of higher education institutions is defined as university; University College; college and institute. The sector constitutes both public universities and private institutions of higher learning. The academic programmes in these HEIs could lead to Bachelor degree; Medical Doctor (MD) or Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) degree; Master's Degree (MA/MSc), or any other degree that may be determined by the academic senate of the institution (HE Proclamation 2009).

The last decade and a half may be identified as the time of rapid change and transformation of the higher education sector in Ethiopia. Since 2000 the government has been vigorously engaged in aggressive expansion schemes that have led to the establishment of new public universities, and the expansion of previous programs and enrolments within the higher education sector. Currently, there are 32 public universities, 30 of which have been established only after 2000. There are also more than 60 private higher education institutions offering undergraduate and post- graduate programs. The sector accommodates 319, 217 students (Cf. MOE 2010) with a gross enrolment rate of 5.3 at national level.

The ultimate power of making decisions on education rests with the Ministry of Education (MoE). The various functions of the Ministry, as outlined in the Higher Education Proclamation (2009) relate to the four major areas of determining requirements,

enforcing policies and strategies, providing assistance and cooperation, and conducting needs assessment on the relevance of educational provisions.

In 2003, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), an agency entrusted with the task of ensuring quality in the sector; and a strategic centre concerned with policy formulation and research (i.e. HESC) were added to the system through provisions laid down in the first Higher Education Proclamation of 2003.

HERQA is given a variety of duties and powers in the Higher Education Proclamations of 2003 and 2009. These responsibilities mainly constitute ensuring quality and relevance of the sector; examining, evaluating and responding to pre–accreditation & accreditation requests; preparing and issuing directives; supervision and continuous evaluation of HEIs; and public disclosure of information. On the basis of this mandate the Agency conducts external quality audit on all HEIs in the country.

- **The State of External Quality Audit in Ethiopia**

External quality audit acts as a mechanism through which quality assurance agencies check if the systems and procedures of an institution are properly functioning and up to an acceptable standard. Customarily, external quality audit looks at the system for achieving good quality and not at the quality itself (Vlaseanu, Grunberg, and Parlea 2007). HERQA's quality audit scheme has, for the first time in the history of a national practice, created a mechanism where by Ethiopian institutions would be accountable to an external body for the quality of their provisions and the systems they have created for this purpose.

The inception and active involvement of HERQA in the scene could also be said to have added a new dimension to the issue of accountability through accreditation, which has been the only or the most dominant form of quality assurance in the Ethiopian higher education sector until 2007.

After the preliminary exercises that took place between 2004 and 2005, HERQA embarked on formal quality audit undertakings within the higher education sector in 2007. Between 2007 and 2009 which may be regarded as the first phase of EQA in the country, nine public and five private institutions were audited.   The reports have been published and distributed to government bodies and the public at large.

- **The Legal Framework for External Quality Audit**

The Higher Education Proclamation of 2003 had no articles on the upkeep of institutional quality and how this works in the context of what are usually known as external and internal quality assurance systems. The only provisions available were those on the pre- accreditation and accreditation mechanisms that were more directed at quality control and meant to apply exclusively to the private sector. Although there were no clear provisions on external quality audit until the Higher Education Proclamation (HEP) of 2009, it should be noted that HERQA started implementing the external audit practice in 2007 using its mandate of ensuring the quality and relevance of higher education in Ethiopia.

In addition to modification of the rules and regulations previously institutionalized with regard to the external quality assurance system, and the new emphasis on internal quality assurance systems, the external audit procedures and the mandates of HERQA with regard to these procedures are clearly laid out in the 2009 HEP.

With regards to external bodies, the ministry, HEIs and HERQA are also expected to guide institutional quality enhancement efforts and curriculum development through a national qualifications framework that will embody core learning outcomes or graduate competencies (HEP 2009: Article 22.7). As indicated in the new proclamation, what is obtained both from internal assessment and external quality assurance through the works of HERQA is supposed to inform institutional changes. Where there are recommendations made, institutions are expected to comply with the requirements of the Ministry and the Agency (HEP 2009: Article 22.5). The Ministry has a special leverage in enforcing this through the strategic plan agreement it shall sign with each public university.

- **External Quality Audit Parameters**
There are ten areas of focus identified for institutional quality audit purposes across the higher education sector in Ethiopia. Higher education institutions are assessed on the bases of these ten criteria developed by HERQA.

Vision, Mission and Educational Goals
HERQA considers these as the starting point for institutional quality audit. HERQA requires the clarity, relevance, applicability and proper dissemination of institutional visions and missions.

Governance and Management System
Consistent with institutional vision, mission and goals, the governance and management system of an institution is examined for its appropriateness, clarity, and participatory nature of the decision making process.

Infrastructure and Learning Resources
The resources of institutions, which are the major foci for accreditation purposes, are given equal, if not more, consideration during the quality audit exercise. The adequacy and utilization of physical facilities, and learning resources such as libraries and computer labs are the major areas of focus. The financial capacity to run the resources is also considered.

Academic and Support Staff
The recruitment, appointment, adequacy, mix, appraisal and pedagogical training of staff is investigated. This is very similar to what is requested during accreditation.

Student Admission and Support Services
In addition to the availability of a student admission policy which needs to be clear, transparent and accessible to students, the overall student support system is examined. The place given to student councils is also investigated.

Program Relevance and Curriculum
As part of its mandate to ensure the relevance of higher education, HERQA demands institutions to justify the relevance of their programs. The curriculum design, approval and review process is also examined for its explicitness, appropriateness in terms of

creating the needed balance between subject knowledge and transferable skills; and the involvement of external professionals and employers in curriculum and program design.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

With regard to teaching and learning, such factors as appropriateness, variety, level of innovation of teaching methodology, and the balance between theory and practice are looked into. The assessment part examines the appropriateness and fairness of standards; transparency of policies and procedures; balance between different types of evaluation mechanisms; and the availability and adequacy of appeal procedures. The availability of academic advice and tutorial support is additionally explored.

Student Progression and Graduates

In a significant departure from accreditation requirements, quality audits examine process and output in a given institution. Attrition rates and measures taken to counter these; employment rate of graduates; link between the institution and employers; the existence of alumni and tracer studies are looked in detail.

Research and Outreach

This is another area which has been underemphasized in HERQA's accreditation checklist. The involvement of the institution in research, consultancy and community service are extensively examined during the quality audit exercise. With regard to outreach, linkage with academia and industries at both national and international levels is also investigated.

Internal Quality Assurance

One of the most important elements of the quality audit practice is the demand on institutions to have in place their own internal quality assurance mechanisms. Accordingly, in addition to having proper policies, system and procedures, institutions are expected to exhibit the manners in which they are engaged in continuously improving their provisions.
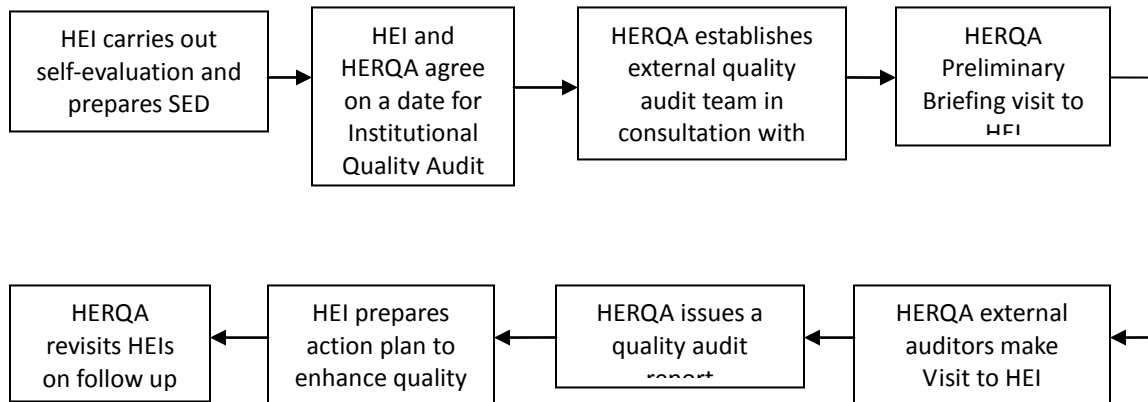
- **Procedures in the External Quality Audit Process**

The quality audit responsibility within the Agency is given to the Quality Audit and Enhancement Team (QAET) which is comprised of five members. The major responsibilities of this committee are as follows:

It (i.e. QAET) is specifically set up with the aim of ensuring the higher education and training offered at any institution is up to standard, relevant and of acceptable quality. The aim is to evaluate institutions at least once every five years with a view to establishing whether such   institutions are up to standard and competent with a view to submitting its findings to the Ministry of Education (Tesfaye and Kassahun 2009:8)

The institutional quality audit is a voluntary process that begins with a request from HERQA if the institution chooses to participate in the scheme. Once the cooperation is secured, HERQA follows the traditional four-phase of self-evaluation, peer review, reporting and publication, and follow- up.

Figure 1: Major Steps in HERQA's Institutional Quality Audit

| HEI carries out self-evaluation and prepares SED | → | HEI and HERQA agree on a date for Institutional Quality Audit | → | HERQA establishes external quality audit team in consultation with | → | HERQA Preliminary Briefing visit to HEI |

| HERQA revisits HEIs on follow up | ← | HEI prepares action plan to enhance quality | ← | HERQA issues a quality audit report | ← | HERQA external auditors make Visit to HEI |

HERQA takes the role of facilitating the whole process in addition to assuming additional roles in the peer-review committee. Members schedule their visit to an institution ahead of time. The visit usually lasts four days and mainly focuses on ascertaining what has been written in the self-evaluation document, and checking how much the institution is capable of ensuring quality in its programs and operations. As noted in HERQA's Institutional Audits Procedure,

The institutional audit team will seek to verify what the HEI has written in their Self-evaluation Document, to compare their evidence and to judge the appropriateness and quality of the educational provision and the effectiveness of the quality assurance system. The team will also seek to evaluate the judgments of the HEI on the quality and relevance of its programs and on how it is enhancing the quality of its provision (2008:5).

In addition to examining the documents, manuals, handbooks, minutes, data and reports that attest the institutional profile and operations as presented in the SED, peer reviewers also engage in extensive interview with senior management, department and faculty heads, staff, students and their council representatives, former students and employers. Students are chosen by the student body representing their appropriate diversity and gender. Physical facilities are visited and classroom observations are made. Thematic enquiries and tracking selected aspects of the institution are used as investigating strategies. The discussion sessions which are well-planned are used to understand better how the institution performs its major functions of teaching, research and community services. These are achieved by the team operating as one group and as subgroups.

At the start of their visit, peer reviewers meet the head of the institution and discuss their major plans for the visit period. Once their stay is completed, they again meet the head of the institution to present their major findings, reflections and what transpired during the course of their stay in the institution. The nature of recommendations that are likely to appear in the final audit report are also highlighted.

The documentation of the observations and critical comments of peer reviewers begins during their stay in the institution. As stipulated by HERQA, the final day of the audit visit is used for verification of emerging judgments and the compilation of key points to be included in the institutional audit report. The documentation further

continues after the visit is over and culminates in the production of a full-fledged report whose draft copy is sent to the institution for checking its accuracy. After this, it goes back to HERQA which publishes and distributes it to pertinent government entities, higher education institutions (public and private) and the wider public.

The publication of the audit report is supposed to serve two major purposes. The first purpose is "to support a higher education institution by recognizing its good practices and by indicating areas where changes in practice can enhance the quality of its programs" (HERQA 2008:11). Secondly, through the dissemination of good practice, HERQA plans to enhance the provision of higher education in Ethiopia and the confidence of all stakeholders in the quality of that provision (Ibid).

The most important consideration after the publication of a quality audit report is perhaps what should be done about the recommendations made by peer reviewers. If this consideration is not seriously treated, the quality audit exercise could turn out to be an end by itself. Hence, both institutions and the quality assurance agency must seek mechanisms whereby specific recommendations made in the quality audit report are seriously attended to. That must be at least why follow-up measures are in many contexts regarded as an integral element of the whole undertaking of external quality audit.

Owing to its close follow-up of international developments in the area, HERQA has lately developed a scheme that takes follow-up as the fourth procedure (after self-evaluation, site- visit and publication of the report) in the whole quality audit exercise. To this end, the Agency has published a position paper HERQA (2008) that considers the development of an action plan, preparation of implementation report, institutional visit and action as the major components of the scheme.

Recommendations are clustered into three major categories of Essential, Advisable and Desirable. According to HERQA (2008), essential recommendations are actions that need urgent attention to assure quality and relevance. Advisable recommendations are made on areas where there is a potential for quality to be at risk, though the action needed is not urgent; while desirable recommendations are actions which will help to enhance quality and relevance. On the basis of recommendations made in the quality-audit report, HEIs are expected to develop an action plan that would chart the corrective measures they would take. The action plan for improvement would identify the measures to be taken (vis-à-vis the recommendations made) and the time frame for accomplishing these. At least a year after the publication of the quality audit report, the HEI is also expected to report to HERQA what it has accomplished pertaining to the recommendations made. After receiving the report from the HEI, HERQA considers it important to arrange a high level visit to the institution in order to check the accuracy of the said accomplishments. Prior notification of this visit, its purpose, what the visiting team wishes to observe and whom to meet during the visit are made. The report from this visit is again compiled and submitted to HERQA's board members who would go through it, add their comments as needed, and submit the report to the Ministry. On the basis of the recommendations made, the Ministry will finally choose to decide what action to take on the concerned HEI.

III. Major Findings of the External Quality Audits on Ethiopian HEIs (2007- 2009)

Excluding the four pilot audits undergone as a trial exercise, HERQA managed to conduct 14 external quality audits on nine public and five private higher education institutions between 2007 and 2009. In what follows, we explore the profile of institutions audited and the results obtained.

Table 1:   List of Institutions that were quality audited

S.N.	Name of Public Institution Audited (Phase 1)	Quality Audit Period	Report Publication	S.N.	Name of Private Institution Audited (Phase 2)	Quality Audit Period	Report Publication
1.	Hawassa University	29th Oct. _ 1st, Nov. 2007	June, 2008	1.	Admas University College	28th July- 1st August 2008	March 2009
2.	Jimma University	Feb, 2008	October, 2008	2.	Royal University College	July, 2008	March 2009
3.	Mekelle University	Nov, 2007	October, 2008	3.	St. Mary's University College	August 2008	March 2009
4.	Gondar University	Nov, 2007	October, 2008	4.	Unity University College	July 2008	October 2009
5.	Haromaya University	July, 2007	June, 2008	5.	City University College	30Dec-2 Jan, 2009/ Oct,2009	October 2009
6.	Arba Minch University	Dec., 2007	October, 2008				
7.	Adama University	July, 2007	June, 2008				
8.	Bahir Dar University	Oct., 2007	Oct, 2008				
9.	Addis Ababa University	30 Dec. 2008 – 2 Jan 2009	Oct, 2009				

Source: Compiled from HERQA's Quality Audit Reports produced (2007- 2009)

Institutional Profile

A brief profile of the audited public and private universities is offered in the following table.

Table 2:   Profile of Public Universities that Underwent Quality Audit

Name of Universities	No. of Students (Regular, Extension, Distance)	No. of Academics	Staff-student Ratio	No. of Faculties / Schools / Colleges	No. of Departments/programs	Year of Establishment as University
Adama	8,225	341	1:24	6	27	2005
Arba Minch	9,285	391	1:24	5	27	2004
Bahir Dar	21,373	856	1:25	5	39	2000
Gondar	8,526	188*	1:45	6	34	2003
Haromaya	18,151	577	1:31	7	34	1985
Hawassa	12,561	677	1:19	9	37	2000
Jimma	24,250	977	1:25	10	59/54	1999
Mekelle	20,000	900	1:22	7	29	2000
Addis Ababa	24,588.00	1,739	1:15	22	780	1962

Source: MOE (2008)

Table 3: Profile of Private HEIs that underwent Quality Audit

No.	Name of Institution	No. of Students (Regular + Extension	No. of Academics	Staff Students Ratio	No. of dept's/ Programs	Year of Establishment
1.	Admas	2975	87	1:32.2	4	1999
2.	City	192	22	1:8.7	4	2007 (as city UC)

3.	Royal	1257	37	1:31.2	3	1997 (as Lancom Institute)
4.	St. Mary's	7500	165	1:12.9(for regular only)	5	1998
5.	Unity	7005	176	1:24.2(for regular only)	16	1997

As compared to public universities, most of the private HEIs that underwent the quality audit are small in size, in the number of students and academics they have, and in the number of programs they run.

The peer review for the quality audits was conducted by HERQA experts and reviewers drawn from public and private institutions and trained by HERQA. The bases for the quality audit are the self-evaluation documents (SED) produced by HEIs and the institutional visits made by peer reviewers. Continuous reference is made to these in the preparation of the final quality audit report produced by HERQA which outlines the major strengths and weaknesses of a given institution in each of the 10 categories identified as requirements. Both at the end of each section and of the whole quality assurance report, strengths are offered in the form of commendations. With regard to weaknesses, recommendations assuming three levels of importance are given. These are identified as *essential recommendations, advisable recommendations, and desirable recommendations* depending on their level of seriousness and the urgency to address them. Best experiences and enhancement plans are also briefly discussed.

The Status of Quality in HEIs: Identified Areas of Strength and Weakness

The quality audit reports produced by HERQA dwell at length on the areas which are identified as strengths and weaknesses of the existing system. As noted earlier, recommendations for improvements are made at three stages identified as Essential, Advisable and Desirable. The points identified for discussion in the area of weakness are mainly drawn from those rated as 'Essential' as these relate to the most critical areas.

Vision, Mission and Educational Goals

Much of what has been identified as area of strength speaks of the availability of guidelines, systems, policies, and infrastructure. In almost all of the institutions the fact that they have developed visions, missions, goals and objectives, strategic plans

have been taken as strong points for which commendations are made under Focus Area 1 *(i.e. Vision, Mission and Educational Goals)*. However, the quality audit reports also indicate that despite the availability of statements related to visions, missions and goals many of our higher education institutions fail in encouraging wider participation in the formulation of policies and strategies. There is also limited attempt to disseminate and internalize the policies among the university community.

Governance and Management System

Similarly, under Focus Area 2 (i.e. *Governance & Management System*) the availability of committee structure, legislation, organogram, committee roles and responsibilities are regarded as points of strength. Moreover, wider participation of students and teachers in university affairs are also taken as indicators of strength. The limited participation of students in university management and the lack of the required committee structures, on the other hand, appear to be main weaknesses in many of the HEIs audited. The fact that certain vacant posts are not filled on time and that communication procedures are weak are other areas identified as weaknesses of the public system.

Infrastructure and Learning Resource

Under *Infrastructure and Learning Resources* (Focus Area 3) institutional attempts to extend or improve such facilities as library, Internet connectivity, ICT and laboratories are acknowledged as positive signs. The current expansion may partly explain the problem, but many of our public universities seem to be short of the basic resources they need to effectively run the teaching-learning process. Shortage in such areas as lab equipment, library stock (especially periodicals), computer and internet access, and office accommodation for staff abound large. The same is true of the private sector. Weak provisions for procurement and maintenance of facilities are also identified as problems in some public universities.

Academic and Support Staff

With regard to *Academic & Support Staff* (Focus Area 4), the availability of guidelines for staff recruitment, appointment, and evaluation are considered as commendable activities. The creation of an ADRC and the availability of pedagogical training (where it is offered) are positively rated. The existence of good academic staff profile in some institutions is also rated as a point of strength. This has again been identified as an area of weakness for many of our HEIs where the academic profile of the teaching and support staff is found far below the requirements of the Ministry. In some institutions there are no HR development plans, and staff evaluation schemes.

Support to ADRC, which, among other things, is supposed to coordinate pedagogical training, is also weak in many institutions.

Student Admission and Support Service

What appear to be basic requirements are again rated as commendable activities in Focus Area 5 *(i.e. Student Admission & Support Services).* Such things as availability of reading rooms, the creation of clean environment, availability of admission policies, counseling service, gender office, and clinic are considered as points of strength. Other points such as positive relationship between student unions and top management, support for low-income students, monitoring the academic progression of students, which appear to have strong bearing on student admission and support services, are also included as points of strength. In most of the public universities, there is an observable weakness in student placement and academic counseling. In a significant number of the institutions audited, campus cleanliness, poor sanitation and water services, and poor hygiene in cafeterias are identified as serious problems. This must be one of the consequences of the tremendous expansion the system has been witnessing in the last decade.

Program Relevance and Curriculum

Under P*rogram Relevance and Curriculum* (Focus Area 6), the establishment of academic standards and review committees, availability of course catalogues, availability of course approval system at various levels and the mechanism of evaluating new curricula are rated as points of strength. Such valuable modalities as stakeholders' participation in program approval and the use of external examiners are also identified as commendable activities. The outstanding problem in this area is the lack of an organized system for program and course approval and review. In some HEIs, documentation on expected learning outcomes and the required procedures for curriculum development are lacking. The identification of average student workload as linked to the credit value of courses is not also addressed in most of the institutions.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

With regard to T*eaching, Learning and Assessment* (Focus Area 7), the development, dissemination and implementation of a policy on teaching and learning; the provision of academic counseling and support to students; training on teaching and assessment are considered as commendable activities. Attempts to make marking more transparent is another point of strength considered. Many of the sample HEIs fail to meet the peer reviewers' demand on the development, dissemination and implementation of a policy on teaching and learning. With regard to assessment, all

HEIs are criticized for using the norm-referenced evaluation system. The lack of training for instructors on teaching and assessment is also regarded as a common problem. Tesfaye and Kassahun (2009) note,

In general, student assessment is mostly dominated by norm referencing and does not involve moderation. The assessment systems are insufficiently robust (sic) to assure compatibility of grading standards between cohorts of students. There is also a concern for fairness. In many higher education institutions there is no sufficiently transparent system that ensures that students are graded fairly and consistently (2009: 14-15).

Student Progression and Graduate Outcome

Few institutions are commended for having systematic collection of data on graduates, student progression and employers' feedback under Focus Area 8 (*Student Progression & Graduate Outcomes*). Student retention mechanisms are also considered to be poor. Organized measures in retaining student attrition are not widely practiced.   Most of the HEIs fail in terms of documenting student progression and graduate outcomes. Their involvement in conducting tracer-studies is literally nil.

Research and Outreach Activities

Under *Research & Outreach* (Focus Area 9), strengthening the overall research set up and building up a research culture is regarded as a commendable activity. The establishment of a Research & Publication Office is also regarded as fundamental. One major area where many of our HEIs are very weak is in research & outreach activities. In addition to the need for strengthening the research and publication office, most of the HEIs are seen failing in encouraging a strong research culture and strategy at institutional and lower levels. Similarly, the significant lack of engagement in consultancy services is observed in some universities.

Internal Quality Assurance

Although few institutions are commended for activities related to *Internal Quality Assurance* (Focus Area 10), most of these activities are as yet related to preparing the ground for the creation of an internal quality assurance system. The list of activities regarded as commendable in this category are: developing and implementing QA policy; developing QA system; clarifying the QA role of the ADRC; and plans to establish QA Unit. The internal quality assurance system at HEIs is either at its inception stage or non-existent altogether. Most of the institutions are very weak at developing and implementing a quality assurance system. Providing training and awareness on the issue is a rare phenomena. Clarifying the quality care role of the

ADRC is also a rarity. This may not be surprising considering the fact that the QA culture is new to the Ethiopian higher education system.

Conclusions

As a new practice in the Ethiopian higher education sector, the external quality audit exercise has been received with mixed feelings on the part of institutions since it was, perhaps, the first externally induced system where institutions, both public and private, are made accountable to the upkeep of institutional quality.

There were, at the beginning, some apprehensions about how the system would affect institutional operations. The fact that the quality audit practice was preceded by awareness sessions, training workshops and wide deliberations by HERQA must have dispelled some of the fears and allowed institutions to have enough understanding and preparation before they embarked on the task. HERQA has, in this regard, done a commendable job by preparing the ground and responding to calls from institutions for orientations and briefings about the system and procedures used.

Both the public and private sectors must have acquired a sense of the quality requirements by subjecting themselves to the quality audits demanded by HERQA since 2007. A significant number of the public universities deployed substantial resources to the preparation of self-evaluation documents, to the external quality audit undertaken by HERQA and to the action plan they had to submit to the Agency on the basis of the recommendations made. Quality audit units and structures have now sprung up for the first time in the internal structures of these universities. The same is true of private institutions.

So far, most of our institutions do not seem to fare well in most of the categories identified as criteria for external quality audit. This may be attributed to a variety of reasons; chief among them must be the lack of an internal system that puts the assurance of quality at the center of institutional operations. Intentions and claims may not bear results unless they are accompanied by observable activities that go towards improving and formalizing the quality agenda. A lot remains to be done in this regard.   As we look into the future, it thus appears imperative that a mechanism should be created that would allow the possibility of harnessing large returns from the huge investment put to quality assurance both at national and institutional levels.

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