Quality Assurance in Ethiopia's Higher Education Institutions: *A Systematic Review of Literature*

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Abstract: The objective of this review was to critically examine scholarly literature on quality assurance (QA) in Ethiopian higher education and thereby provide readers with a state-of-the-art understanding of the subject with future research direction. To this end, a systematic review method (evidence synthesis technique) was employed. Major data sources were journal articles, dissertations, theses, conference papers, national QA policy documents, and higher education proclamations. Findings of the studies suggest that the introduction of QA to Ethiopia's HE is a recent phenomenon that is affected both by external factors, like international discourses on quality in HE, and internal pressing factors. The legal and regulatory frameworks of QA are enshrined in the HE proclamations of 2003, 2009 & 2019 and the national Quality Audit guidelines (HERQA guideline); both IQA & EQA methods were applied in the HEIs. QA largely focused on the input and process domains giving little attention to the output domain. A robust QA system is lacking. The implementation of QA has been fettered by challenges and problems related to policy, structural and functional issues. Accordingly, the existing QA lacks conceptual, legislative and structural comprehensiveness, and thus, can be labeled as a system in the infancy stage. Recommendations for policymakers, regulators, and leaders of higher education institutions include creating a robust, dynamic, and responsive system by eliminating the existing deficiencies and anomalies of the system. Finally, this paper winds up by readdressing gaps identified in the studies as areas of further investigation and interventions.

Key Words: External quality assurance, HERQA, internal quality assurance, PRISMA, quality assurance, quality assurance mechanisms, quality culture, quality education, quality framework.

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Introduction

Quality in higher education (HE) is a multi-dimensional, multilevel, and dynamic concept that can be considered in various interrelated activities, such as curriculum, teaching, student learning, assessment, student experience, student selectivity and research. So, the quality of education in HEIs can be envisaged in terms of the quality of educational inputs, processes and outputs that influence student learning and achievement.

Quality assurance (QA) has become a global issue crossing the cultural contexts of many higher education (HE) systems since the 1990s, the time when the Education for All (EFA) movement was launched.

Like the concept of quality, QA is a multi-dimensional and contextual issue, which implies different things in different national and regional contexts and has been used to denote different practices (Ellis & Hogard, 2019; Ryan, 2015; ENQA, 2009). For instance, Matei and Iwniska (2016), argue that QA designates sophisticated national frameworks, including QA agencies or other dedicated entities, formal quality standards and specific review processes and procedures at the level of HEIs or the level of academic programs, or both. According to UNESCO (2007), QA is an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving the quality of a HE system, institution, or program. In a nutshell, QA in HEIs can be comprehended as the totality of the policies, values or attitudes, procedures, structures, resources, and actions devoted to ensuring continuous improvement of the quality of the educational processes.

The growing popularity and demand for a greater focus on quality and QA in HE in the past two or three decades are linked to several global, regional, and national developments and changes in the HE. These are the growth demand for HE and the emergence of a large number of private providers since 1990s; the ensuing diversification of HE and the uncertainty about the quality of the services provided; the reduction in

public funding for HE in many countries; globalization and the increase of student and professional mobility, which was most evident in Europe after the Bologna Declaration in 1999 (Matei & Iwiniska, 2016; Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2018; Brookes & Becket, 2014; Materu, 2007).

In the past two decades, many African countries have established national QA policies and monitoring bodies to ensure the quality and relevance of education provided in their HEIs. The emergence of private HEIs and the need to regulate their activities appear to have been the main trigger for the establishment of QA agencies in most countries (Dakovic, Kelo, and Ranne, 2018; Ansah, Swanzy & Nudzor 2017; Ansah, 2016; Machumu, & Kisanga, 2014; Kebede, 2014; Materu, 2007).

In Ethiopia, apart from the demand for efficiency and competitiveness, the private initiatives in HE, and international discourses on quality in HE can be mentioned as the main drivers for the establishment of QA agency (Rediet, 2021 & 2015; Cherinet, 2020; Wondwosen, 2020 & 2018; Lemecha, 2020; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Materu, 2007; Ashcroft, 2004).

In the Ethiopian context, QA has been conceived as a planned, systematic, structured, continuous review and evaluation of all programs, courses, instructional materials, teaching-learning, and assessment at HEIs to maintain and improve these through continuous quality care efforts; and confirm the conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by HEIs and other relevant national bodies (HERQA, 2006).

Since QA is regarded as the nerve system of institutional business that permeates every aspect and affects everybody in the system, this review set out to examine scholarly literature on QA in the Ethiopian HE and thereby capture the status of the QA system at the national level.

Objectives of the Review

The objectives of this review were to critically appraise evidence of scholarly literature on QA synthesize their results, and identify gaps in the studies.

Review Questions

In light of the above objective, this review sought to answer the following basic questions:

1. What were the main drivers for the adoption of national QA in the Ethiopian HE system?
2. What legal and regulatory frameworks were in place for QA?
3. What were the QA mechanisms or approaches and models employed in the Ethiopian HE? How were they conducted?
4. What were the major challenges and shortcomings of implementing QA?
5. What are the major results of the studies?
6. What are the major recommendations (implications) of the studies?
7. What are the limitations of the studies?

Rationale for Conducting the Review

A rationale for conducting this review is based on the conviction that a synthesis of multiple studies possesses considerable strength in complementing evidence from individual studies and establishing the quality of that evidence. This may address any uncertainty or variation in practice that may occur. So, summarizing the findings of various studies can be more powerful than isolated findings from individual studies in providing a holistic picture of the issue under consideration.

Moreover, conducting a systematic review, as noted by Zawacki-Richter et al. (2020), provides an excellent opportunity to embed a research topic

into the broader framework of research areas in a scholarly discipline, to build upon the body of knowledge in that area and communicate gaps in the literature. Thus, doing a systematic review is a very fruitful exercise in any research project to gain a solid overview of the relevant body of literature and provide readers with a state-of-the-art understanding of the research topic with future research direction. In a nutshell, this systematic review is undertaken to keep abreast of all previous and new research and inform future practices.

Operational Definitions of Key Terms

Accreditation: A process of establishing the status, legitimacy, or appropriateness of a HEI or a study program by a responsible body of the institution.

External Quality Assurance (EQA): Supra-institutional policies and practices whereby external bodies assure the quality of HEIs and programs.

Institutional Self-assessment: Self-review or self-evaluation that can help HEI check how far it is achieving its strategic mission and goals, and allows it to prepare an action plan for further development.

Internal Accreditation: A process of establishing the status and appropriateness of a study program by the responsible body of the institution.

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA): The policies whereby HEIs themselves monitor and improve the quality of their education provision.

PRISMA: This is an acronym that stands for *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*, and describes criteria for conducting and reporting systematic reviews and

meta-analyses. It is a guideline that has been referenced for this review.

Quality (Academic): Quality in HE is a multi-dimensional, multilevel, and dynamic concept that relates to a) the contextual settings of an educational model, b) the institutional mission and objectives, as well as c) specific standards within a given system, institution, program, or discipline.

Quality Assurance: An all-embracing term denoting the totality of the policies, values or attitudes, procedures, structures, resources, and actions devoted to ensuring continuous improvement of the quality of the educational processes.

Quality Audit: A process of reviewing HEIs' core process by national or other external agencies to check that the quality and relevance of the programs, curricula, staff infrastructure, and other elements meet the stated objectives and aims of the institutions and determine the level of the institution's system of quality care and accountability.

Quality Culture: HEI's culture is characterized by a cultural/psychological element on the one hand and a structural/managerial element on the other. It refers to a set of shared, accepted, and integrated patterns of principles of quality to be found in the HEI cultures and the management systems of HEIs.

Quality of HE: The totality of a university's effectiveness in its core processes and functions to satisfy students' and other stakeholders' needs, priorities, and requirements.

Systematic Review: A technique that involves the aggregation of available information or data from studies using well-defined and transparent methods to search, summarize, and interpret a body of literature.

Methodology

This review adopted an internationally recognized guideline known as the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA 20), which describes criteria for conducting and reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Sinha, A., Menon, G. R. & John, D., 2022; Chong & Chen, 2022; Page et al, 2021; Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., & Mulrow, C. D, 2021; Zawacki-Richter et al, 2020; Hammersley, 2020; Newman & Gough, 2020; Siddaway et al, 2019; Gough, Oliver & Thomas, 2017; Cooper, 2010).

A systematic review (SR) applies a technique called 'evidence synthesis,' (Grant & Booth, 2009) that involves the aggregation of available information using well-defined and transparent methods to search, summarize, and interpret a body of literature (Sucharew & Macaluso, 2019; Gough et al. 2017; Siddaway et al., 2019). In the evidence synthesis, the different kinds of text about individual studies and their results are meshed and linked to produce patterns in the data, explore different configurations of the data and produce new synthetic accounts of the phenomena under investigation (Page et al, 2021; Zawacki-Richter et al, 2020; Cooper, 2010).

The purpose of an SR is to sum up the best available research on a specific question (Sucharew & Macaluso, 2019; Siddaway et al., 2019). Following that, it attempts to collate empirical evidence from a relatively smaller number of studies pertaining to a focused research question (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Higgins & Green, 2011). Second, SRs aim to provide a descriptive overview of the reviewed material by critically appraising individual studies or synthesizing evidence from different studies (Siddaway et al., 2019; Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

In 2005, Arksey & O'Malley published the first methodological framework for conducting SRs and proposed an iterative five-stage process: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3)

study selection, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. In light of this, this systematic review was guided by the steps in the systematic review process that include defining the review question, developing the search strategy, selecting search sources and databases, selecting inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening and coding of studies, appraising their quality, and finally, synthesizing and reporting the results, and drawing conclusions.

Data Sources

This review builds on references from previous studies, literature and policy reviews, and technical reports at the international, regional, and country levels. The most important data sources were peer-reviewed journal articles as well as grey literature, like master's thesis, PhD dissertations, conference papers, and national QA policy and guidelines produced since 2006. In short, in this study, an attempt has been made to use the most relevant and available sources on the QA in the context of Ethiopian HEIs.

Table 1: Types of literature/ Studies used for the review

No.	Type of Literature	
1	Journal Articles	*18*
2	PhD Dissertations	*5*
3	Master's Thesis	*2*
4	Quality Assurance Guidelines and Policy Document	*3*
5	Conference Papers	*3*
6	National Policy Documents & Proclamations	*1*
7	General Literature	*33*
	Total	*65*

The Search Strategy

Relevant literature pertaining to QA in HE that is assumed to serve the objectives and basic questions of the review was searched and accessed through extensive Internet searches. Included in this search engine were *Google, Google Scholar, ERIC, JSTOR,* and *Microsoft Academic.*

Search terms or keywords used are quality assurance, quality enhancement, quality control, quality improvement, quality evaluation, quality assessment, quality development, quality management, quality culture, quality audit, quality & relevance, quality accreditation & reaccreditation, internal quality assurance, external quality assurance, quality assurance procedures & practices, quality assurance models/framework/policy/guideline. The search terms were selected through a review of titles, abstracts, and keywords of articles already identified as relevant.

The Study Selection Criteria

This selection of literature used in this study had three phases:

Phase 1: *Search in the selected databases*. The search string was applied to all selected databases according to the particularities of each one;

Phase 2: *Preliminary selection*. Reading the title, the abstract, and keywords of the articles selected in the bases, to verify compliance with the eligibility criteria;

Phase 3: *Full reading screening*. The studies were carefully analyzed in a complete reading to verify if they undoubtedly met the eligibility criteria, resulting in the papers included for final analysis.

Coding of the Studies

Finally, literature serving the purpose of the review was mapped out to conduct the review. Once relevant studies were selected, the data from individual studies were systematically identified and recorded to answer the review questions. The coding describes the focuses, methods, procedures, results, recommendations, and limitations of the individual studies.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The thematic approach is used in data presentation and analysis. The themes were basically drawn from the major points raised in the review questions.

Drivers for the Adoption of National QA

The adoption of formal QA is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Ethiopian HE. The program was initiated in 2003 by the Federal Government (Lemecha, G. 2020; Girmaw, 2014; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Abebaw and Aster, 2012; Mulu, 2012; Tesfaye, 2011; Rediet, 2014 & 2015).

The adoption of QA in the Ethiopian HE was a response to several internal changing situations, such as breakneck expansion of HEIs and soaring student enrollment since the mid-1990s; the increasing pressure in demand for transparency and accountability by government; the emergence of private HEIs as potent alternatives and the need to regulate their activities; and international pressures on quality in HE, like the influence of international donors (Tadesse & Yilfashewa, 2022; Lemecha, 2020; Wondwosen, 2020 & 18; Rediet, 2014 & 2015; Mulu, 2012; Tesfaye, 2011; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Girmaw, 2014; Kebede, 2014; Abebaw & Aster, 2012; Tesfaye 2011).

National QA Policy Framework

In Ethiopia, the national QA procedures embody both external and internal processes and are steered by a government policy framework, assessment dimensions, and criteria (HERQA & Ashcroft, 2008).
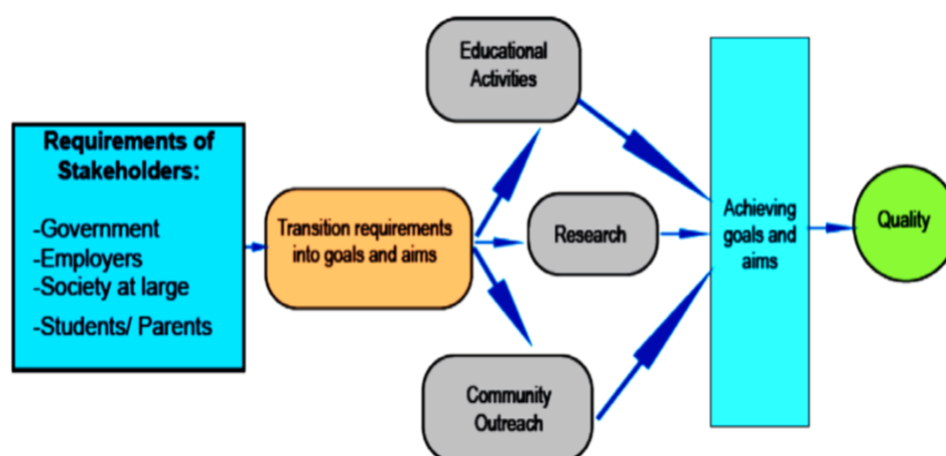

Figure 1: QA frameworks in Ethiopian HEIs

The Ethiopian government established the national QA agency, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) through the Higher Education Proclamation, 2003 with the aim of monitoring and supporting higher education institutions in order to provide quality and relevant higher education (HERQA, 2006 & 2014; Kebede, 2014; Girmaw, 2014; Mulu, 2012; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Tesfaye & Kassahun 2009. HERQA's mandates include mainly quality monitoring, including conducting external quality audits (EQAs), setting standards, accreditation of private HEIs and programs, monitoring HEI quality enhancement activities, and providing technical assistance in curriculum development (FDRE/MOE, 2003 & 2009; Tesfaye, 2011; Tesfaye & Kassahun, 2009; Rediet, 2015).

The policy framework for universities within the national QA process is that the outcomes of university education are scrutinized in cycles of five years through an external process while the universities develop and review their own internal processes that are checked by an external agency every five years (HERQA, 2006 & 2014).

Themes of the EQA

HERQA auditors use ten focus areas to assess and evaluate the quality of higher education within both government and private higher education institutions (HERQA, 2006b & 2014). These are vision, mission and educational goals; governance and management system; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; students' admission and support services; program relevance and curriculum; teaching, learning, and assessment; student progression and graduate outcomes; research and outreach activities, and internal quality assurance. So, these elements can be regarded as the scope and yardsticks of the national QA framework. As noted by Materu (2007) and Tesfaye (2011), these specific elements or yardsticks against which an EQA is done are also the most widely used in Sub-Saharan Africa.

*Themes of the IQA (*Key areas of quality designed for HEIs)

At the institutional level, the most important legal frameworks that laid the groundwork for QA were the *Higher Education Proclamations* (HEPs) of 2003, 2009 & 2019, and *the Institutional Quality Audit guidelines* endorsed by HERQA (2006a,b,d). The HEPs specified the focus areas of institutional QA and enhancement, such as assuring the quality of course contents; teaching-learning processes; professional development of academic staff; student evaluation, assessment, and grading systems; student evaluation of course contents, methods, and systems of delivery (FDRE / MOE, 2009). Nonetheless, a similar degree of focus and depth in quality management is lacking in the mission of HEIs for research and community services.

Mechanisms Employed by the HEIs

There are three broad types of QA mechanisms: *accreditation, audit*, and *self-evaluation* (Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2018; Mulu, 2012). Many higher education systems adopt one or more of these approaches. *Accreditation* is a process of establishing the status, legitimacy, or appropriateness of a HEI or a study program by the responsible body of the institution (Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2018). An institution or a program is granted accreditation for meeting minimum standards of quality (Ryan, 2015). *Quality audit* is a process of reviewing HEIs' core process by national or other external agencies to check that the quality and relevance of the programs, curricula, staff infrastructure, and other elements meet the stated objectives and aims of the institutions and determine the level of the institutions' system of quality care and accountability. *Institutional self-assessment*, also known as self-review, self-study, or self-evaluation, is a core element in most QA systems. Self-evaluation helps an institution check how far it is achieving its strategic mission and goals and allows it to prepare an action plan for further development (UNESCO, 2007).

The Ethiopian HEIs have been assuring the quality and relevance of education and training they offer through three mechanisms: *internal self-assessments (self-reviews), external reviews (audit)* based on the self-assessment, and *monitoring and follow-up* (Wondowosen, 2020; Cherinet, 2020; Lemecha, 2020; Tesfaye S., 2011).

IQA Mechanisms

*Institutional Self-assessment **(ISA)*** is one of the IQA mechanisms applied at the HEIs. There are three-step procedures in the self-review: first, a department-level review of performance, followed by a college-level review, and finally, ***an*** institutional review***.***

Internal accreditation is the second type of IQA mechanism that has been applied at public HEIs. It is a process of establishing the status and appropriateness of a study program from the responsible body of the institution.

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

Nonetheless, participation in the self-evaluation and peer review workshops seems limited to three main stakeholders, HERQA, the HEIs, and the Government. The views of other stakeholders, particularly students and employers are not represented, however.

Figure 2: Quality Assurance Cycle (Adapted from Tesfaye Teshome, 2014)

EQA Mechanisms (Accreditation & Quality Audit)

The formal EQA practice began after accreditation was introduced in 2007 into the system. This came after trial audit exercises were undertaken by HERQA. The two major types of EQA mechanisms were *quality audit* and *institutional/program accreditation.* The accreditation practices of the Agency, however, have been criticized for heavy reliance on educational inputs to the exclusion of educational processes and outcomes as well as for the application of dichotomous accreditation and quality control requirements for the private HEIs *per se* (Rediet, 2021; Cherinet, 2020; Tesfaye S., 2011).

As part of its mandate, HERQA is also responsible for conducting external quality audits for all HEIs (Cherinet, 2020; Tesfaye & Kassahun, 2009; HERQA, 2006 & 2014). According to HERQA (2006a), an *institutional quality audit* is an in-depth analysis and assessment of the quality and relevance of programs and the teaching and learning environment. Nonetheless, the mandate of approving the final decisions of the quality evaluation goes to the MOE. So, in this regard, HERQA assumes a quasi-autonomous status.

Research Outputs and evidences of QA in Ethiopian HE

There are two primary sources to understand the actual essence and practices of QA in the HEIs of Ethiopia. They are studies conducted since 2008 and the external quality audit reports that HERQA has been publishing since 2007.

There is a growing body of literature (i.e., PhD dissertations, Master's thesis, journal articles, and proceeding papers) about QA in Ethiopia that address a variety of issues related to the whole system. In respect to their focus, the majority of the studies, however; have concentrated on investigating and analyzing specific issues like implementation of QA procedures & methods, and challenges encountered (Cherinet, 2020; Asalif H., Maheshwari, G. C. and Yadav, R., 2020; Wondwosen, 2011,

2018 & 2020; Lemecha, 2020; Rediet, 2014 & 2015; Abeya, 2014; Ashcroft & Rayner 2012; Abebaw & Aster, 2012; Tesfaye S., 2011; Tesfaye & Kassahun, 2009; Mulu, 2012; Misgana, 2013; Kebede, 2014).

The others addressed other domains of QA, like the impacts of leadership on QA (Arega, 2016); the impacts of the QA system (Tefera, 2014; Girmaw, 2014), and quality auditing tools (Tadesse & Yilfashewa, 2022). Yet, none of them have provided an in-depth analysis of the particular efficiency of the QA mechanisms identified vis a vis the broader purposes for which they have been created.

Notwithstanding their limited scope, covering certain foci of the QA framework and giving more concern to QA practices in the public HEIs, the studies have provided their readers with a panorama of the QA regime in the HE of Ethiopia.

Concerning the research method employed, 23 studies used the qualitative method, while 5 studies employed the mixed-method approach. A quantitative method was not used solely. Thus, the majority of the studies are qualitative in nature. The problem identification is mostly exploratory while the reporting style is descriptive and explanation. Table 2 below shows the types of literature by the research approach each employed.

Table 2: Types and number of reviewed literatures

Research Approach	Types of Studies/Literature					
	Journal Articles	Dissertation	Thesis	Conference Papers	Proclamations and policy guidelines	Total
Qualitative	18	2	2	3	-	25
Quantitative	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mixed-method	-	3	-	-	4	7
Total	*18*	*5*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*32*

Challenges and Shortcomings of QA

Despite some headway, QA is still fettered by challenges and problems (Wondwosen, 2020 & 2018; Cherinet, 2020; Arega, 2016; Girmaw, 2014; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Mulu, 2012; Tesfaye S., 2011; Tesfaye & Kassahun, 2009).

Challenges related to national QA policy

A major shortcoming of QA is the deficiencies associated with the national QA policy framework. For instance, the HE Proclamations of 2003 & 2009 inherently gave more emphasis to the teaching-learning domain over the research and community services. So, there is a disproportionate focus on the core university functions.

The second problem is the imbalance in the strategic emphasis of the HERQA. That is, in the quality audits conducted so far by the agency, the research and outreach activities of HEIs are downsized into a single category while the teaching-learning is given more depth and coverage. This has shown a lopsided focus on the core institutional tasks, which contravenes the conviction that an institutional policy for QA has to be essential for all tasks.

The third structural problem is related to the jurisdiction of HERQA in which the HE Proclamations have limited HERQA's duties and responsibilities for the accreditation and quality auditing of private HEIs while depriving it of the mandate to accredit the public HEIs (Cherinet, 2020; Tesfaye S., 2011).

The absence of explicit quality indicators is another challenge observed. HEIs were not using within-built quality indicators in their QA systems (Kebede, 2014; Tefera, 2015). The absence of these yardsticks can create confusion and the possibility of subjective interpretation. This undoubtedly puts significant pressure on internal quality reviewers to make judgments about what is reasonable.

The studies also indicated that structural and strategic issues posed major challenges to QA in the HEIs. Most often, IQA units are not well integrated into the university system. Deficiencies such as a lack of vision, resources, and leadership support are observable weaknesses. In addition,   poorly articulated procedures are commonly observed across universities (Rediet, 2015; Abeya, 2014; Mulu, 2012; Tesfaye S., 2011; Wondwosen, 2012). These system-level deficiencies appear to have hampered the task of coordination, implementation, and follow-up of IQA tasks and responsibilities.

There is also a weak external linkage. HERQA has had poor linkage with the external world, like international QA networks (Wondwosen, 2020; Lemecha, 2020; Misgana, 2013; Tesfaye S., 2011). The weak ties have likely resulted in a lag behind in keeping the international standards. This is because the system may have inadequate connections with international agencies to share knowledge, experience, innovations, and practices

Challenges related to Institutional QA Systems

Challenges such as the following have prevented the execution of comprehensive QA practices across all university units: a shortage of educational resources (material and financial), ineffective university leadership and governance, meager staff and student engagement and commitment, problematic structural positioning, such as harboring QA responsibilities under the office of Academic Affairs (Cherinet, 2020; Asalif et al., 2020; Arega, 2016; Rediet, 2015; Girmaw, 2014; Misgana, 2013; Kebede, 2014; Mulu, 2012; Tesfaye., 2011).

Summary of Results

This systematic review has followed ***the aggregative synthesis logic,*** suggested by Zawacki-Richter et al. (2020), to summarize the results of the reviewed studies.

Drivers for the Adoption of National QA

The massive expansion of HEIs, especially the emergence of private HEIs and the need to regulate their activities as well as the international wave on quality in HE, appear to have been the main triggers for the establishment of the QA system.

HEPs & Institutional Quality Audit Guidelines as basic frameworks for QA

The formal QA in the Ethiopian HE has its beginning in 2003 with the issuance of the first HE Proclamation in 2003, and consequently, the establishment of HERQA. The framework for both the external and internal QA is, therefore, laid out in the HEPs of 2003, 2009 & 2019 and HERQA's guidelines of 2006, 2014 & 2016.

The Ethiopian Government has used the QA policy as a means of regulating a rapidly expanding and largely unregulated private market that has developed.

QA Mechanisms/Approaches Employed in the Ethiopian HE

QA in Ethiopia's HE system involves both EQA (accountability-oriented) and IQA (improvement-oriented) approaches. There has always been a noticeable tension between EQA and IQA. *Accreditation, quality audit, peer review and self-evaluation* are the most commonly used QA mechanisms, although all are deployed with little coordination among them. This might have undermined the possible gains that could have helped the system achieve the purpose of promoting quality higher education at a national level.

Ethiopia's system of measuring quality has been based on a QA model that assumes HEIs have some degree of autonomy and quality systems in place. This idea is closely related to QA systems in the UK and The Netherlands.

The methods, procedures and tools used to assess the quality of HE by HERQA are in line with the general model of HE quality assessment. This is a practice adopted from QA systems in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands.

Participation in the self-evaluation and peer review workshops is limited to three main stakeholders: HERQA, the HEIs, and the Government. The views of other stakeholders particularly students and employers have not been represented.

The studies uncovered that there have been variations between the public and the private HEIs in the implementation of IQA and their values. The EQA practices largely focused on the process aspects of quality (at public HEIs) and the input aspects of quality (at private HEIs). It included activities like pre-accreditation and accreditation, and quality audits through performance reports of the institutions.

There is no sufficient evidence of the interplay between the two approaches of QA, that is, there is a weak practice of establishing a relationship between the IQA employed by the HEIs and the EQA by HERQA. By Focus, most of the studies and Quality Audits have concentrated on implementing the core tasks designed for HEIs in the HERQA's Guidelines. Quality culture is not a well-developed notion in the Ethiopian HE. Thus, the QA regime can be expressed as a system at the infancy stage.

Challenges and shortcomings of QA

QA has been fettered by challenges and problems related to the national policy and institutional operations:

- QA places more strategic emphasis on the quality of the teaching-learning core tasks in the national QA framework and the external quality audit reports than on research and outreach services of HEIs.
- The double standard of HERQA is one of the anomalies found with the national QA system: Unlike the private HEIs, the public HEIs are not subjected to the accreditation system of HERQA. As a result, the Agency could not equally influence the assurance of quality in the public sector.
- Weak quality culture in the HEIs: *Quality culture* refers to an organizational-psychological perspective, which focuses on shared values and commitment towards quality among HEI members. It plays a critical role in bringing quality HE. Despite its ascribed significance, however; quality culture is non-existent.

These system-level and institutional-level deficiencies obviously hampered the task of QA and quality enhancement in the regime of Ethiopia's HE.

Generally speaking, the following points provide a panorama of the QA:

- Top-down QA initiatives: the existing QA system seems a top-down approach as both the initiation and procedures came from MOE (HERQA) to HEIs.
- Input-focused and process-focused QA is prominent.
- Quality assurance is closely related to quality control.
- QA model that has been developed by HERQA stemmed from the Dutch and UK QA systems that are based on self-evaluation and external review.

- The application of dichotomous quality requirements and other discriminatory regulations for public and private institutions on the part of HERQA is noticeable.
- QA lacks comprehensiveness.
- Absence of clarity whether the QA practices contributed to the improvement of the teaching and learning processes or transformed the student learning experiences.
- There is a weak quality culture in the HEIs and, hence naïve QA system in the country.

Recommendations

The studies put forth many evocative recommendations as a way for the improvement of QA policy, strategies and practices. The most relevant ones are aggregated and reported below:

- Revising and realigning the existing QA framework and then, develop a well-integrated, dynamic, an all-inclusive and equitable system.
- Developing explicit quality indicators **(**harmonized standards**)** through a joint consultation of key stakeholders.
- Propping up HERQA to be capable, effective and credible organization, and improving the weak ties and cooperation with the international network for QA, like INQAAHE & ENQA.
- Developing a quality culture through built-in IQA and boosting the competence, motivation and engagement of the leadership and the faculty in the HEIs.
- Creating a dynamic synergy between IQA and EQA mechanisms and processes.
- Bolstering stakeholders' (students', teachers', employers', etc.) engagement in IQA, since it is an area in which multiple interests interact.

Table 3: Summary Table of the Review

No.	Section and Topics
1	**Introduction** ▪ *Objective:* This systematic review aimed to provide a descriptive overview of QA policy and practices in the Ethiopian HEIs by critically appraising individual studies or synthesizing evidence from different studies and scientific reports, and finally identify gaps to be filled by future research. ▪ *Rationale:* Conducting a systematic review, like this one, provides an excellent opportunity to embed QA issue into the broader framework of research areas in a scholarly discipline, to build upon the body of knowledge in that area and to identify gaps, deficiencies, and trends in the current evidence and inform future research in the area. In short, doing a systematic review is a very fruitful exercise in any research project to gain a solid overview of the relevant body of literature pertaining to the topic studied. ▪ *The research questions* that this review was intended to answer were concerned with different issues, such as drivers for the adoption of national QA in the Ethiopian HE system; legal and regulatory frameworks QA; QA mechanisms and models employed by the HEIs and the national agency for QA; major challenges and shortcomings of implementing QA; major findings of the studies; limitations of the studies; and implications of the studies. ▪ *Information Sources:* both peer-reviewed and grey literature types were used as data sources of this review. These include journal articles, conference papers, conference presentations, theses and dissertations. In general, 28 research papers as well as 3 guidelines and 1 HE proclamation that have direct relation to QA policy and practices in the Ethiopia's HE were mapped out and reviewed to answer the review questions. ▪ *Selection Criteria:* both empirical works (peer-reviewed journal articles) as well as theoretical works, scientific reports, and policy documents focusing on the policy and implementation practices of QA in the Ethiopian HEIs were duly used for the review purpose. ▪ *Selection Strategy:* both *bibliographic database & hand-searching* of specialist studies and scientific reports of QA in the Ethiopia's HE system were employed. Included in the search engine were Google, Google Scholar, ERIC, and Microsoft Academic. Key search terms were *quality assurance, quality enhancement, quality control,*

	quality improvement, quality evaluation, quality assessment, quality development, quality management, quality audit, quality & relevance, quality accreditation, etc.. ▪ *Search Limit:* peer-reviewed studies and grey literatures produced since 2006 were used for this review.
2	**Discussion** • *Summary of main findings:* the practice of QA in the Ethiopia's HE is a recent phenomenon, effected both by external, and internal pressing factors. The legal and regulatory frameworks of QA are enshrined in the HE proclamations of 2003, 2009 & 2019, and HERQA's guidelines issued since 2006. QA involves both EQA and IQA approaches while QA practices were largely focused on the input and process domains. There have been variations between the government and the private HEIs in the implementation of IQA and their values. The implementation of QA has been fettered by challenges and problems related to policy, structural and functional issues. QA is lacking a robust, dynamic and responsive system. • *Limitations:* Regarding the limitations of the evidence included in the review, outcomes of QA practices, and the interplay between IQA & EQA were not addressed by the studies. Compatibility between institutional self-assessment and its goal, philosophy and the kinds of educational outcomes has not been studied. The extent of key stakeholders' participation in the QA has remained unaddressed. There is no discussion on the alignment between QA policies and the visions, missions and goals of the HEIs. QA practices at public HEIs were given more focus than QA practices at private HEIs. This has created difficulty to capture a comprehensive picture of QA Among the ten key areas of quality that have been prescribed in the HERQA's guidelines, some of them (e.g., institutional vision, mission and educational goals; students progression and graduate outcomes, management and leadership) were hardly addressed by the studies. Therefore, research that will examine these issues is needed. In connection with the focus of the studies, the majority have concentrated on the inputs (especially at private HEIs) and the processes (both at private and public HEIs), disregarding the outcomes or felt impacts of the system, like improvements shown (if any) in the institutions' performances and in the students' progression and graduate outcomes. So, the outputs of QA

	practices do not seem to have been proportionally represented in the studies. Regarding limitations of the review process, subjectivity may have its impact on the selection and screening information sources. • *Implications of the results for practice, policy, and future research:* revising and realigning the existing QA framework, and then, developing a well-integrated, dynamic, and a robust QA system. In addition, developing explicit quality indicators (harmonized standards) through joint consultation of key stakeholders and propping up HERQA to be capable, effective and credible organization are desirable measures, Improving the weak ties and cooperation with the international network for QA; developing a quality culture through built-in IQA and boosting the competence, motivation and engagement of the leadership and the faculty in the HEIs are areas towards which attention needs to be drawn. Equally important are creating a dynamic synergy between IQA and EQA mechanisms and processes and bolstering stakeholders' engagement in the QA. The reviewed studies and scientific papers have theoretical and practical contributions to the QA regime in the following ways: Firstly, by addressing the status of the QA policy and practices and the problems that encountered the system. Secondly, by giving inputs for HE quality assessment in the form of bringing different perspectives, approaches, and best practices and narrowing the observed gaps and building on the strengths of the system, Thirdly, by providing evocative recommendations, which have implications for future research and intervention.
3	**Conclusion** This review unveiled that QA is at its infancy, and research on quality and QA of HE is also scanty. More motivation and support are needed to encourage research in the area. QA is a recent phenomenon in our context that requires due attention by both the government and HEIs to get it steadily going. In a nut shell, filling the existing gaps and deficiencies in the QA system and giving due respect to the recommendations of the studies is of a crucial concern to the prospects of improving QA regime in the Ethiopia's HEIs.

Table 4: Summary of the Reviewed Studies

No	Researcher's Name	Title of the study	Year of publication	Method of the study	Type/Category of the paper
1	Abebaw Adamu & Aster Addamu	Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Procedures and practices at B/Dar university.	2012	Qualitative method	Journal Article
2	Abeya Geleta	Quality assurance policy and practice in higher education institutions in Ethiopia	2014	Mixed-method	Dissertation
3	Akalewold Eshete	Quality Assurance Practices in Ethiopian Higher Education: The Case of Addis Ababa University	2008	Qualitative method	Conference paper
4	Arega Yirdaw	Quality of Education in Private Higher Institutions in Ethiopia: The Role of Governance.	2016	Qualitative method	Journal Article
5	Asalif Habtegeorgis, Maheshwari, and Yadav.	Adoption of Quality Management: the case of Ethiopian Universities	2020	Mixed-method	Journal Article
6	Ashchroft, K	Emerging Models of Quality, Relevance and Standards in Ethiopia's HEIs.	2004	Qualitative method	Journal Article
7	Ashcroft, K. & Rayner, P.	The Purpose and Practices of Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: journey,	2012	Qualitative method	Journal Article

		adaptation and integration.			
8	Chernet Aytenfsu	External Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Comparing Practices in Public and Private Universities	2020	Qualitative method	Dissertation
9	Eshete Abebe	The Functioning of Accreditation in Ethiopia: A study focusing on the views of Private HEIs	2009	Qualitative method	Journal Article
10	FDRE/MOE	Ethiopian Higher Education Proclamations	2003, 2009 & 2019	-	Proclamation
11	Girmaw Abebe	Higher Education in Ethiopia: Expansion, Quality Assurance and Institutional Autonomy	2014	Qualitative method	Journal Article
12	HERQA	Areas of focus for institutional quality audit.	2006b	-	QA Guideline
13	HERQA	Preparing a self-evaluation document.	2006e	-	Guideline
14	HERQA	Quality assurance policy.	2014	-	Policy doc
15	Kebede Nemomsa	Quality Assurance Practices in Ethiopian Public and Private Higher Education Institutions	2014	Mixed-method	Dissertation
16	Lemecha Geleto	Higher Education Quality Assessment in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study.	2020	Qualitative method	Journal Article
17	Melaku Dires	Higher Education Quality Audit in	2008	Qualitative	Master's Thesis

		Ethiopia: Analyzing the Methods and Procedures		method	
18	Misgana Teshome	Assessment of the Implementation of Higher Education Quality Assurance Guidelines in Public Universities in Ethiopia	2013	Mixed-method	Dissertation
19	Mulu Nega	Quality and Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Critical issues and practical implications	2012	Mixed-method	Dissertation
20	Rediet Tesfaye	Institutionalization of Quality Assurance in an Ethiopian Public University	2014	Qualitative method	Master's Thesis
21	Rediet Tesfaye	Expanding Quality Assurance in Ethiopian HE.	2015	Qualitative	Journal Article
22	Tadesse Abera & Yilfashewa Seyoum	A Critical Analysis of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency's (HERQA) Institutional Quality Audit Tools: Focus areas, thresholds, references, and checklist of the University of Gondar.	2022	Qualitative method	Journal Article
23	Tefera Tadesse	Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Boon or Bandwagon in Light of Quality Improvement?	2015	Qualitative method	Journal Article
24	Tesfaye Semela	Breakneck Expansion and Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Ideological	2011	Qualitative method	Journal Article

		Rationales and Economic Impediments.			
25	Tesfaye Teshome	Higher Education: Quality, Quality Assurance, the Concept and its Elements and HERQA's Focus Areas	2014	Qualitative method	Proceeding paper
26	Tesfaye Teshome & Kassahun Kebede	Quality Assurance for Enhancement of Higher Education in Ethiopia: Challenges faced and lessons learned.	2009	Qualitative method	Research report
27	Wondwossen Tamirat	The Nuts and Bolts of Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Practices, Pitfalls, and Prospects	2020	Qualitative method	Journal Article
28	Wondwossen Tamirat	Towards a Diversified System of Quality Assurance	2018	Qualitative	Journal Article
29	Wondwossen Tamirat	Beyond the Establishment of Quality Assurance Agencies.	2018a	Qualitative	Journal Article
30	Wondwossen Tamirat	The Evolving Quality Assurance Framework in Ethiopian Higher Education	2012	Qualitative	Research report
31	Wondwossen Tamirat	Evaluating the Evaluator: HERQA in the Eyes of Private Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia.	2011	Qualitative	Conference paper
32	Yohannes Woldetinsae	Quality Assurance System and Accreditation.	2009	Qualitative	Journal Article

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