Quality: An Ideological Construct?

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Abstract: Nearly all those involved in the Ethiopian higher education system recognize the crucial role that an agency such as the Higher Education Relevance & Quality Agency (HERQA) will play in the maintenance and assessment of the quality of education offered at a time of rapid and substantial expansion. However, at present it is not clear how HERQA will undertake its role to supervise the quality of higher education when there is still a need to clarify what is meant by quality in the Ethiopian context, how it can be identified and judged. This paper argues that there is a need for stakeholders to come together and negotiate an agreed understanding of what quality looks like, what is acceptable as minimum standards and the processes and procedures that HERQA needs to undertake its evaluations. Each stakeholder has its own ideology, its own set of ideas and values that, for each stakeholder will appear as 'common sense' and will influence how they define quality and how they see the role of HERQA. It is therefore important that all those involved in higher education in Ethiopia acknowledge the status and legitimacy of HERQA as an autonomous body and the processes and criteria it uses. It is also important that all stakeholders feel that HERQA represents, at least to some extent, their own particular interests. This can only be achieved if there is a clear acknowledgement by different stakeholders as to what their interests are, the extent to which they compliment or compete with other stakeholders' interests and the degree to which dialogue takes place and consensus is reached. HERQA to be effective needs moral legitimacy and support as well as legislative power. Based on research undertaken in 2004 for the Higher Education System Overhaul (HESO) and in 2005 for HERQA and the Higher Education Strategy Centre (HESC) and a reading of relevant literature, this paper explores in more detail what the various stakeholders in the Ethiopian higher education sector may expect or demand from higher education and how their particular ideologies will influence their own individual notions of what is meant by quality. The paper also explores what quality means in an expanding and 'massified' higher education system and

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the lessons for HERQA. For HERQA to ensure quality standards it needs the support and cooperation of all the other stakeholders in Ethiopian higher education and a broad agreement on how quality will be defined and tested. Quality cannot be achieved in isolation and it cannot be imposed from above, it has to be a negotiated communal effort. Eventually all of those involved in the higher education sector will need to work together and come to some common agreement so that we all share a common understanding of what is meant by quality and that we are all 'doing the right things in the right way'.

Introduction

The term ideology may be used to describe any form of thought which underpins the social structure of a society and which consequently upholds the position of the dominant class. Louis Althusser further defines this concept to represent an unconscious set of values and beliefs, which underpin the ways in which we make sense of the world.[1] Ideology works in the way that these values and beliefs are taken for granted or seen as 'common sense' and are therefore rarely challenged or questioned. Quality is something intangible that is hard to characterise and agree upon although we are all confident that we can recognise it when we see it and can acknowledge its absence. Yet we may each see different things as quality, for example rote learning may be argued by some as a form of quality as it instils knowledge into students and is efficient in classes with large student numbers whilst others will argue that it is an example of poor quality as it is not 'student centred' and does not provide students with the understanding of how to apply that knowledge. The introduction of plasma screens in Ethiopian secondary schools has been cited as both examples of good practice and bad practice. Therefore, judgements about what is quality can be very subjective and depend on the particular views, attitudes and beliefs of those making the judgement.

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[1] Watson and Hill (1997:107)

Yet Ethiopia is in the process of establishing an organisation to report on the quality of higher education, both public and private. The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) was established by the 2003 Higher Education Proclamation (351/2003). The Agency has recently moved into new offices, has established a Board that meets regularly, has recently appointed a Director, and is training recently appointed expert and support staff. It started to undertake its duties at the beginning of the 1998 (EC) Academic Year.

The Ethiopian higher education sector that HERQA is to report on is in the process of a rapid 'massification' that has seen the number of public universities increase from two only a few years ago to nine in late 2005. Recently the Ethiopian Government announced the establishment of thirteen new universities, plus an 'open' university. A few years ago there were less than six accredited or pre-accredited private colleges and universities. Today, the number is more than seventy for diploma and 34 for degree programs.[2] Private HEIs are also being encouraged to expand in order to assist the Government in meeting its targets. Private HEIs currently enroll over 39,000 students: 23% of the total national enrolment in higher education[3]. Last year, the Minister of Education announced that within the next five years, students from private HEIs should account for between 40-50% of the total enrolment in higher education.[4]

Nearly all those involved in the higher education system recognize the crucial role that an agency such as HERQA will play in the maintenance and assessment of the quality of education offered at a time of such a rapid and substantial expansion. However, at present it is not clear how HERQA will undertake its role to supervise the quality of higher education when there is still a need to clarify what is meant by quality in the Ethiopian context, how it can be identified and judged. This paper argues that there is a need for stakeholders to

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[2] ESDP III p.8
[3] ESDP-III p.8
[4] Keynote speech, 2nd National Conference on Private Higher Education in Ethiopia, July 2004. Addis Ababa.

come together and negotiate an agreed understanding of what quality looks like, what is acceptable as minimum standards and the processes and procedures that HERQA needs to undertake its evaluations.

The list of possible stakeholders in the higher education process is a long one: Government, employers, HEIs themselves (both managers and faculty), students and parents, donors and probably others. Each of these has its own ideology, its own set of ideas and values that, for each stakeholder will appear as 'common sense' and will influence how they define quality and how they see the role of HERQA. According to Salter and Tapper all stakeholders have

> a stake in knowledge production as producers, consumers or regulators and all have a view, or are developing a view, of how they should relate to that process.[5]

Labeling something as quality, or perhaps more importantly, being labeled as lacking quality, can be a powerful weapon in the wrong hands. It is therefore important that all those involved in higher education in Ethiopia acknowledge the status and legitimacy of HERQA as an autonomous body and the processes and criteria it uses. It is important that all stakeholders feel that HERQA represents, at least to some extent, their own particular interests. This can only be achieved if there is clear acknowledgement by different stakeholders as to what their interests are, the extent to which they compliment or compete with other stakeholders' interests and the degree to which dialogue takes place and consensus is reached. HERQA to be effective needs moral legitimacy and support as well as legislative power.

Based on research undertaken in 2004 for the Higher Education System Overhaul (HESO) and in 2005 for HERQA and the Higher Education Strategy Centre (HESC) and a reading of relevant literature, this paper explores in more detail what it is that these

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[5] Salter and Tapper (2000:66)

various stakeholders may expect or demand from higher education and how their particular agendas and perspectives will influence their own individual notions of what is meant by quality.

Government

Althusser identifies education as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), one of those social institutions like the family, the church or the legal system which helps shape support for the ideology of those who control the state.[6] In nearly all countries of the world, education is seen as a key component of the socialization process and so deserving of state attention and intervention. In Ethiopia, the relationship between the state and higher education has been fractious' as political regimes have attempted to legitimize their regulation and control of academic activity. At a time of massification, expansion of private HEIs and the newly granted autonomy for public HEIs, the state needs to be able to ensure that targets are met, public resources are used efficiently and at the same time reassure the public that massification is not being achieved at the cost of a drop in standards. This results in what Salter and Tapper, call an 'economic ideology of education' which sees higher education as an

> …economic resource which should be organized in a way that maximizes its contribution to (a country's) economic development. From this premise it follows that socially relevant, or applied, knowledge is more important than pure knowledge, that higher education institutions should be responsive to economic needs, and that it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that these institutions are held accountable to society for carrying out their economic role correctly. In this ideological context, the regulation of higher education is not only legitimate but essential.[7]

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[6] Watson and Hill (1997:106)
[7] Salter and Tapper (2000:68)

This view of higher education is plainly enshrined in the Ethiopian Government's *ESDP III.* According to *ESDP III* the major goals of higher education in Ethiopia are

- To develop responsible and competent citizens who meet the quantitative and qualitative demand for a high-level trained labor force based on the socio-economic development needs of the country.
- To ensure democratic management and governance in Higher Education system.
- To set up cost effective, efficient and results-oriented system in order to develop an appropriate range of modern and effective human resources management and resource practices and procedures.
- To develop the volume, quality and relevance of research and consultancy services which are necessarily directed to the needs of the country.[8]

Governments in most countries, when trying to fund an expansion of higher education whilst at the same time having to work within finite tax revenues, tend to try and find ways of making the optimum use of available resources and place emphasis on the efficient production of higher education outcomes and, like students and employers, talk about 'value for money' and 'fitness for purpose'. In Ethiopia, the Government wants to be reassured that every birr that is spent on higher education is well spent and that it is being used to its maximum good. This will mean that pressure will be put on HEIs by the Government or the Ministry of Education to ask both public and private institutions to produce the maximum number of graduates of the highest possible quality at the lowest possible cost.

The Government expects HEIs to meet this mandate and wants to satisfy itself that institutions are providing what has been promised at

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[8] *ESDP-III* p.23

an acceptable price and to an acceptable standard. Success or failure can then lead to financial repercussions as for public institutions Government provides the major part of their funding and will be able to reward or punish HEIs. For example, the Government may decide only to fund certain programs or by adjusting or adding additional incentives[9] depending on the extent that public HEIs are seen to meet Government demands. Government's influence over the direction and contribution of the private sector is achieved less directly: through the Ministry of Education's accreditation process,[10] private HEIs are given (or refused) a 'license'. The Government can also encourage (or discourage) the expansion of the private sector through a variety of other instruments such as import duty on books and other teaching materials, the allocation of land, access to cheaper credit and loans and a variety of other financial and judicial measures.

Many governments also favour quantitative measurements of quality in higher education as these are seen as more tangible and generally simpler to collect. Numerical or statistical data is often seen as unproblematic in their analysis. This dependency on quantitative data often results in a requirement of HEIs to produce and publish performance indicators (PIs) on a number of 'outcomes', for example: student pass rates; student drop out rates; employment of graduates; staff/student ratios; cost per student; class size; number of laboratories or other learning support resources such as books or PCs; staff qualifications; number of staff publications; etc.

PIs were introduced into the British higher education system during the 1980s with mixed success. As Salter and Tapper note,

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[9] The current proposal for the block grant allocated through a funding formula to fund public higher education includes a 10% top slice for incentive funding for the recruitment and graduation of female students and disadvantaged students. In the future, the Government may decide to change these categories.

[10] The Unit currently responsible for the pre-accreditation, accreditation and renewal of accreditation for private HEIs has recently moved from the Ministry of Education to HERQA.

> Initially the politicians and bureaucrats had placed their faith in performance indicators as the means for establishing the accountability relationship it desired between cost and quality…but despite the growth of an official industry on the subject in the late 1980s and the early 1990s no consensus emerged on what the key indicators were and how they could best be related to funding.[11]

PIs do have some value as part of a general overview but there should be considerable caution in using them as an accurate measure of quality and an institution's efficiency. It is also important to understand that, as Vroeijenstijn notes, efficiency is not the same as quality:

> In assessing quality, an important question will be, 'Do we achieve the required level of quality with acceptable costs?' An efficiency-orientated approach as such is a good starting point, but the problem is that efficiency is not always defined as 'against acceptable costs' but often as 'against minimal costs' and this may be a threat to quality.[12]

Governments like that of Ethiopia tend to like PIs because they can be scored and ranked and so give an appearance of objective quality comparators and of accountability, especially when PIs are measured against sector benchmarks. However PIs very rarely explain *why* something is the way it is: for example if the sector average for dropout rates is 12%, why does university X have an average of 16%? Is it because their assessment procedures are more rigorous and therefore an indicator of quality; is it because the institution is indifferent to the progress and welfare of its students and therefore an indicator of poor performance; or perhaps is it because it specialises in subjects (such as teacher training) that require complex skill development but do not attract the best students?[13]

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[11] Salter and Tapper (2000:75)
[12] Vroeijenstijn (1995:16)
[13] For a detailed analysis of the problems associated with PIs see *CHEMS Paper 30 University League Tables and Rankings: Critical Analysis* and 'Canada' in

The Government of Ethiopia also supports the idea of 'ranking' universities as this allows them to reward those it considers 'best' and punish, often by public shaming, those it considers have failed to meet its requirements. Ranking of universities is however a controversial matter, heavily criticised in many countries because of the way in which rankings often reduce complex activities and relationships into a simple number that often gives an inaccurate impression of the difference between two or more universities (what, for example, is the objective difference between a university that scores 4.6 out of 5 and one that scores 4.8 out of 5?). There is also often disagreement over what components should be included and how they are interpreted and the judgments drawn are often contentious.

Employers

In the UK part of the debate surrounding the purpose and aims of higher education is an expectation amongst many employers that

> '…the prime responsibility of higher education institutions is
> to produce the graduates needed by industry.'[14]

Many private employers would adopt an ideology of the market place: a plentiful supply of graduates of the highest quality but at the lowest cost. Employers, whether public or private, expect a higher education system that offers 'fitness for purpose'. In other words, a system that produces graduates that meet the needs of the country's industries and services. Graduates should not only match the vacancies that business and organizations wish to fill but also have the necessary skills that will enable them to work effectively in a modern and more dynamic manner. In the UK, this is usually translated into phrases

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Chapter 3 and '*The Time's* Good University Guide' in Chapter 5 of *Benchmarking in Higher Education: An International Review*, both available online at http://www.acu.ac.uk/cgi-bin/frameset.pl?ml=yearbook&sl=yearbook&select=yearbook

[14] Alderman (1996:188) quoted in Salter and Tapper (2000:79).

like transferable and/or employment skills. These may include communication and numeracy skills, time keeping, team working skills, problem-solving and research skills, and increasingly important skills in information technology and entrepreneurialism. In the U.K. increasingly instructors themselves are expected to have recent and relevant experience of employment outside of higher education.

In Ethiopia, such work-related skills are still relatively new for both HEIs and employers although some employers and professional organizations are increasingly demanding some degree of involvement in the design of curricula and teaching methodologies to ensure that graduates are fit for the purposes of industry and commerce and that transferable and employability skills are integrated into curricula.

Faculty

In Ethiopia, as in many countries, there are both 'old' and 'new' HEIs. The timescale involved may be different by many hundreds of years but the principles and attitudes are remarkably similar whether it is in the UK, Australia, or Ethiopia. Salter and Tapper characterize 'Old' universities as being part of an elitist 'traditional liberal university ideal' which combines

> The university's pedagogical, social, and cultural functions into an interdependent and self-sustaining set of arrangements for the creation and transmission of knowledge underpinned by the principle of university autonomy. [15]

They suggest that the aim of these types of universities is to develop 'cultivated men and women' and that

> In pursuit of these objectives, the university, acting as a community of scholars, should democratically organize its own affairs unrestricted by, and unaccountable to, any

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[15] Salter and Tapper (2000:67).

outside body since any restriction on academic freedom was deemed to undermine its cultural identity and diminish its central social value as a source of independent authoritative judgment.[16]

This view of academic freedom as inviolate has been a dominant ideology for many years both in the UK and in Ethiopia, particularly amongst academics whom, it could be argued, it most benefits. It is an ideology that at worst inherently justifies an attitude of 'we know best': 'universities embody quality. They do not need to demonstrate it'.[17] At best however academic freedom is an essential part of the democratic process and should allow for dissenting or opposing views to be aired.

Increasingly in Ethiopia, as in other parts of the world, the ideology of the old universities is being challenged by the massification process that indirectly attacks the elitism of the traditional liberal university ideal. Notions of accountability are shifting the most complacent attitudes although sometimes faculty responses to questions of quality are seen as 'special pleading' ('I need more research time, a better computer, less students to supervise, a bigger laboratory', etc.). It can also be seen as yearning for an (illusory?) golden past where students, theoretically at least, were 'better' (which is often code for fewer in number, more able and therefore easier to teach) and were considered privileged to have had the opportunity to be exposed to the great minds of university professors. Today faculty often aspire to being a 'centre of excellence' as a means of restoring some of their academic authority. Although centres of excellence may be desirable in some departments of some institutions, it is unlikely that more than a very few departments in one or two universities in Ethiopia can realistically achieve international 'centre of excellence' status and in any case this will only benefit a small minority of students. It is more important that the majority of students in all the universities have a

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[16] Salter and Tapper (2000:68).
[17] Trow (2000:16)

high-quality experience and whilst perhaps not achieving 'excellence' will at least achieve a good standard.

It is true that massification of higher education in most countries has been, at best, difficult for faculty in the 'old' universities to adjust to[18]. Despite the claims of a minority of instructors encountered during the research undertaken last year for the HESO report and this year for HERQA, there is nothing intrinsic about massification that leads to a decrease in quality; this only happens if instructors and managers in HEIs do nothing to prepare for the changing circumstances, whether it is the provision of additional resources (what most faculty ask for), larger class sizes (what most managers ask for) or a change in teaching and assessment methods (what HERQA may ask for).

The experience in other countries such as UK suggests that it is possible to greatly expand the number of undergraduates and graduates going through the higher education system and still provide high quality education. Ethiopia may need to look at and adapt the experience of the UK and other systems where massification has been successfully implemented without loss of quality and, using the Academic Resource and Development Centers (ADRCs), provide instructors with planned and sustained training that gives them the skills and tools necessary to teach and assess in this new environment.

HEI Managers

Again looking at the UK experience it is possible to see the need for a shift in the way that HEIs are managed in Ethiopia. Under the old 'traditional liberal university ideal' academic work was largely unregulated except through internal systems that were often rather ad-hoc and inconsistently applied. Decision-making involved collegial committees (equivalent to the Academic or Departmental Commission) and those who ran HEIs were expected to be academic

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[18] see Ashcroft 2004

leaders, well-known in their field and credible in the academic community, probably promoted on the basis of their research, teaching or length of service. Increasingly, HEI managers throughout the world have had to change as they cope with the consequences of massification. They have had to adapt to a new ideological approach to public service management, what Deem calls 'New Managerialism'. Deem characterizes New Managerialism as a set of ideologies about organizational practices and values. He says:

> This approach to higher education places considerable emphasis on cultural change and the need to overtly manage academics and academic work in the context of further marketisation of publicly-funded education, using explicit performance and quality indicators for teaching and research and introducing a severe restriction on units of funding per student and for capital expenditure.[19]

Senior managers in Ethiopian HEIs have to deal with processing more students with the possibility of a reducing unit of funding alongside increasing demands from government and taxpayers that they offer 'the right outcome at the right price'. This means that their role is changing and that professional, trained managers are now needed who can deal with human resource management, financial planning, and many other non-academic tasks. Increasingly, senior managers are expected to implement government policy rather than maintaining academic excellence. Some of these managers, for example, those responsible for financial management or estate management, may need to come from outside of the academic community and bring in expertise and knowledge from the private sector, abroad or other more modernized state sectors.

Managers in Ethiopian HEIs should be keen to meet internal and external quality standards (if only to avoid criticism if not for any other more principled reason) and will need to prepare their institutions for the rigours of accountability and state regulation

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[19] Deem (2004:109)

> Practical control technologies such as funding mechanisms, target-setting, regulatory practices (for example quality assurance procedures for teaching and student feedback), performance indicators and appraisal, can all be used to transform strategies into practices, techniques and devices that challenge existing systems of 'bureau-professionalism'.[20]

Managers, both public and private, should be asking themselves: How do we know that we are doing the right things? How do we know that we are doing the right things in a right way? How do we know that our graduates are meeting the expected requirements? And how do we know that we are providing quality?

HERQA expects universities through their ADRCs and Academic Program Officers (APOs) to take a lead role in the development of quality assurance in Ethiopia. It is also an expectation of HERQA that HEIs, both public and private, will start to undertake their own internal audits and that they will certainly have undertaken one prior to any external quality evaluation visit undertaken by HERQA.

Students

It is unclear where students fit in the ideology of the traditional liberal university ideal that Salter and Tapper describe. The authors suggest that students are simply seen as

> …privileged members of the university audience; privileged because they constitute a small elite to whom the experience of university education has been granted.[21]

In countries where the higher education sector is being 'massified', governments are increasingly looking for alternative sources of funding as they can rarely finance the cost of expansion solely through the public purse. This means that students are being asked to

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[20] Deem (2004:111)
[21] Salter and Tapper (2000:68)

contribute to their education. Cost-sharing, massification and the increasing dominance of the ideology of the market place results in turning students into customers. In the UK and in other more developed systems, this means that students increasingly demand guaranteed returns for their investment of time and money. They will look at the published results of quality audits of potential universities and/or departments. Students may visit several universities and question staff on what it is they can offer and expect to see the facilities and resources (libraries, computer centres, specialist laboratories, etc.) that will be at their disposal.

Currently, students in Ethiopia are allocated to public universities although this is likely to change in the mid to long term. Universities will eventually be required to adapt to a demand-led system. If universities are funded through student numbers, then it is important for their financial security that they successfully convince these potential students that their institution is able to offer them what it is they want at a reasonable cost, financial or otherwise.

So what is it that students want from higher education in Ethiopia, especially now that the cost-sharing scheme will require students to pay back from salaries the cost of their board and lodging and a percentage of their tuition whilst at university?[22] What students will ask for could possibly be summed up as 'value for money'; that what they pay for both directly (through fees to private universities and through cost sharing at public universities) and indirectly (through other costs such as the sacrifices that they or their families may make to support a student through higher education or loss of income whilst studying) are matched by the benefits that they receive after graduation. Benefits may include good employment opportunities but for some/many students benefits may be more nebulous, such as greater independence in their intellectual life, greater autonomy in being able to make life decisions and a better quality of life in general. There is much research, both in developed as well as developing

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[22] See *Higher Education Proclamation 351/2003* Section 4 Article 56.

countries, which indicates that the higher the educational attainments of an individual the more his/her life improves in many ways; improved health, longer life, higher income, more security in the provision of basic necessities, etc.[23]

Students also want to be reassured that their particular program meets certain minimum standards. Research undertaken for both HESO and HERQA shows that students would generally welcome some opportunity to contribute to the development of curricula. Students will often define quality as good teaching, teaching that allows the student to learn effectively and that is supported by an assessment process that is fair, transparent and equitable and clearly understood by students. Students also define quality as a system that is fair to them, eliminates bias or quirks in marking and ensures no gender or ethnic discrimination.

Donors

There are various donors involved in the reform and expansion of higher education in Ethiopia; the World Bank, Department for International Development (DfID), European Union (EU), United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC) amongst others. Whilst they may focus on different projects and different aspects of the higher education sector, they all share a common ambition: to see a well-structured, comprehensive and equitable sector that corresponds to international standards and assists the country in meeting its development targets. The donors

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[23] See for example World Bank, (2002) *Constructing New Knowledge Societies: new challenges for tertiary education.*, Hauptman, AM (1999) or 'Student-based higher education financing policies' in *International Higher Education,* 14 5 – 6. or Johnstone, DB and Marcucci, P (2003) 'Cost sharing and higher education in southern and eastern Africa.' *International Higher Education,* 30. 9 – 11.

agree that a robust quality assurance system is crucial to the success and credibility of any new 'massified' higher education system. [24]

Some donors, the World Bank in particular, also have a particular interest in promoting a more market-orientated, demand-driven higher education sector, one that in particular offers students more choice, and challenges the dominance of the public HEIs and fosters:

> greater private sector involvement in the higher education expansion program; and (improves) the linkages between the labor force demands of an emerging knowledge economy and instructional programs offered at the universities.[25]

As growth in the Ethiopian higher education sector is partially predicated on a major expansion of the private sector, transparent, efficient and reliable external regulation is required to ensure that the public are protected from dishonest and questionable quality providers that may emerge in the midst of such rapid private expansion.

Thus, quality for donors will be less about specific measures or criteria but more about ensuring that an effective system is in place and functions correctly. As the World Bank observers:

> To be effective, its (HERQA's) goals, policies, and actions must be carefully thought out and implemented so that it is not just another bureaucratic hurdle but rather focuses on the quality and outcomes of student learning in tertiary institutions. Its aims, procedures, and standards must be acceptable to the public, the academic community, and the national government.[26]

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[24] See for example Joint Review Mission Report November 2004 in Ethiopia's *ESDP-II.*
[25] World Bank Report (2004:vii)
[26] World Bank Report 2004:62

Donors will also want reassurance that the body responsible for quality assurance, HERQA, is independent of external influence or vested interests. HERQA must be able to demonstrate its operational autonomy from influence or pressure from the Ministry of Education or Government and be seen to undertake its responsibilities in a fair and transparent manner.

Quality for donors then can be seen perhaps as an absence of any particular or dominant ideology but rather as accountability for both the responsibilities of academic freedom and for the privileged position faculty occupy in a democratic society as well as accountability for the public funds that public universities rely upon. Donors, along with all stakeholders, will expect to see appropriate returns on the investment that they, as individuals and as a nation, make in higher education, its staff, its students and its resources.

Conclusion

Education in general and higher education in particular can play a key role in the transformation of Ethiopian society, politically as well as economically. Higher education is essential if Ethiopia is to be successful in its Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme (SDPRP). Higher education is also a crucial pillar of a democratic society.

According to Ashcroft,[27] higher education relates to certain higher social and economic purposes, and in particular: the freedom to question taken for granted assumptions and through this process the protection of democracy; the creation and transfer of knowledge and development of new practices; and the creation of today's and tomorrow's notion of professionalism.

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[27] Ashcroft 2003:7.

This is developed further by Ashcroft and Rayner, thus:

> Higher education's role in questioning authority and so protecting democracy and minority views is perhaps one of its most important in the Ethiopian context. Universities sit alongside the judiciary, a free press, and a parliament as representing one of the pillars of a democratic society.[28]

In relation to the regulation and quality assurance within higher education in Ethiopia, there is probably much commonality amongst the various stakeholders. For example it is probable that all stakeholders would agree that there are some elements that we would all recognize as being part of quality, such as:

- Safeguards for students, particularly in relation to assessment,
- Consistency of standards within and between HEIs both public and private,
- The need to take account of employability skills and development needs of the country,
- Addressing HIV/AIDS,
- Explicit and published curricula, assessment criteria and rules and regulations,
- Minimum standards of facilities and staffing levels,
- Sector wide benchmarking or graduate profiles to identify outcomes that students should achieve.

However, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect all the stakeholders in higher education to agree and share a common definition of quality except in the very broadest sense. For example, all stakeholders claim the right to influence curricula. Within almost any society, there is a variety of contending ideologies representing different sets of power structures, social interests and different sets of values and beliefs. Each is seeking to extend its own authority and gain common acceptance for its view of making sense of the world. These

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[28] Ashcroft and Rayner 2004a:3.

ideological sets can overlap but different stakeholders will have varying degrees of influence over the process of defining quality; for example, the Ministry of Education appears to be a much more powerful body than the students' unions and so the state's ideology will probably be more dominant in any discussion or negotiation about accountability and regulation in higher education.

Vroeijenstijn, among others, suggests that quality can broadly be defined as 'doing the right things in the right way' – however (and by whoever) these may be defined. Perhaps unjustly, those working in HEIs in Ethiopia, both managers and faculty, have frequently been blamed for the weaknesses that exist in the current system, for not 'doing the right things in the right way'. It seems unreasonable to blame a small group of intelligent, dedicated and hard working people for faults that are perhaps the consequence of having to deal with other more pressing national priorities, political instability, past economic stagnation and long term under-investment. Leadership in the HEIs, both public and private, can be seen to be trying to make changes and improve the provision that is offered to stakeholders. However, this will take time. In Europe's more sophisticated, more developed, better resourced, more mature higher education sector, problems such as negotiating between the conflicting interests of the, many stakeholders in higher education still requires a difficult balancing act; one that is constantly being re-appraised. It is therefore to the credit of all involved in the Ethiopian higher education sector, both public and private, that higher education is in as strong a position as it is and that there is such strong commitment and determination in HEIs that higher education should improve, meet international standards and assist the country in meeting its development needs.

What type of higher education a country needs and thus how its quality is defined should be part of a public debate that takes place within a country and is influenced by the research and ideas that circulate internationally.

Many countries throughout the world are 'massifying' their higher education system and have to face the issue of how to ensure quality within an expanding system. For HERQA to ensure quality standards, it needs the support and cooperation of all the stakeholders in Ethiopian higher education plus a broad agreement on how quality will be defined and tested. Quality cannot be achieved in isolation and it cannot be imposed from above, it has to be a negotiated communal effort. Eventually, all of those involved in the higher education sector will need to work together and come to some common agreement so that we all share a common understanding of what is meant by quality and that we are all 'doing the right things in the right way'.

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