Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions: Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

In these days of professional accountability, quality has become a limelight and a sine-qua-non for institutional existence; intrinsic need to increase efficiency and effectiveness; and a change of institutional mission to meet the demands of ever competitive environment-information, and knowledge-based economy. This era, therefore, is a time of both opportunity and challenge for quality. As an opportunity, more people in many countries and many cultures work on quality matters than ever before. This could be due to: a) the need to meet the increasing needs of the learners to be effective in this competitive world, demanding Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to internationalize their programs; b) the need to expand Higher Education (HE); b) the need to paced with the international markets; c) the diminishing resources, but greater expectations from HEIs; and d) the need for flexible modes of educational provisions.

Consequently, there is a demand for a shift of institutional research focus from a concentration on technical to contextual intelligence by empowering the key implementers (teachers) with the premise of informed doing so that they consider issues of what (descriptive science), what ought to be (normative science), and what events mean (interpretive of hermeneutical science) in carrying out institutional level assessment (Watson & Maddison, 2005 taking from Chan, 1993; Joshua, 1998, cited in Firdissa, 2006.a).

At the heart of universities' missions lies the learning quality of the students in which case the teaching staffs are the key work forces. This is because

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those who are responsible for its implementation can only assure quality. By implication, the operational area implementers need to be empowered and committed to take ownership of quality care at their respective institutions. The internal workforce in an institution, therefore, should be empowered for the fact that institutions with a strong capacity for self-study will be better placed to meet the quality assurance requirements… and also to improve their own practice (Watson & Maddison, 2005, in Firdissa, 2006 a).

The initiatives for quality care and its sustenance, therefore, should be from within the HEIs themselves for the fact that externally "imposed change is unlikely to enhance the learning process…." (Lomax, 1996: 49, cited in Firdissa, 2006.a). By implication, the potential for HE quality enhancement is determined by the type of indicators identified for assessment, the manner in which and by whom the assessment is conducted and by whom the subsequent change is implemented.

This paper deals with the analyses of the opportunities and challenges to assure quality-internationally and nationally with a purpose to fine-tune the implications of such deliberations to Ethiopian HEIs. It raises more questions than gives answers with the intention to create awareness and propose betterment, the cumulative effect of which enhances quality of education at universities in particular and the countrywide school system in general.

Conceptions and Basics of Quality

Defining quality at the level of HEI has proved to be a challenging task. This is because quality is 'determined by a wider set of criteria which reflects the broadening social composition of the review system'; it becomes a composite, multidimensional concept (Furlong & Oacea, 2005).

Historically, the notions of quality were originated from the business practices. Consequently, many discussions on quality start with a quotation from the book *Zen and the Art of* Motorcycle Maintenance:

> Quality…you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof...Obviously some things are better than others…but what's the 'betterness'? So round and round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding any place to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it?
> (Vroeijenstijn, 1995 taking from Pirsig, 1974, cited in Firdissa, 2006.a, p. 18)

William Edwards Deming, the quality control guru who was instrumental in steering Japan from post-World War II industrial recovery toward world economic power once in his quality lecture said: Quality is not something you install like a new carpet or set of bookshelves…You implant it. Quality is something you work at. It is, thus, a learning process (Levy, 1993).

Quality is like love. Every body recognizes and talks about it, and knows what he or she is talking about as everybody knows and feels when there is love. Beyond this, in talking about a concrete product we want to buy, for example a computer, it is easy to define: it has to do with what we expect it to do. In areas like education, however, quality is an abstract, illusive, vague, controversial, notoriously ambiguous, and complex concept (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Pounder, 1999, all cited in Firdissa, 2006.a). The reason could be due to the presence of different perspectives to it.

At the broadest level, education quality can be viewed as a set of elements that constitute the input, process and output of the education system, and provide services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations. If higher education is viewed as a system, then any quality management program must, hence, assess inputs, process and outputs (Cheng & Tam, 1997, cited in Firdissa, 2006.a).

Different stakeholders prioritize the importance of different dimensions of quality according to their perspectives and purposes. The concept of quality in higher education, thus, is complex and dependent upon different stakeholders' perspectives as a result of which it can be broken down into five different but related dimensions as: exceptional (high standards); consistency (zero defects); fitness for purpose (fitting customer specifications); value for money (return on investment, accountability); and transformative (an ongoing process that includes empowerment and enhancement of satisfaction) (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996, cited in Firdissa, 2007.a).

Different stakeholders assess it in a variety of ways. In most cases, the focus is predominantly on the extent to which the procedures and conditions that are perceived to result in appropriate levels of quality are followed within institutions or programs and are effective in meeting their purpose (Jackson, 1996).

Defining quality, therefore, demands consideration of interaction between accountability and autonomy for it determines the culture within universities. In some universities, like Monash in Australia, quality is 'fitness for purpose', so the primary intent of reviews is to evaluate the operational area's fitness for purpose and to reflect on the processes used to achieve that purpose, the outcomes achieved and the means by which outcomes are evaluated (Weir & Dixon, 2004, cited in Firdissa, 2006.a).

Moreover, Deming's philosophy (in the 1970's) pertaining to quality was summarized by some of his Japanese proponents with the following (a) versus (b) comparison:

   (a) When people and organizations focus primarily on quality, quality defined by the ratio: results of work efforts divided by all costs, then quality tends to increase and costs fall over time.
   (b) However, when people and organizations focus primarily on COST, then costs tend to rise and quality declines over time (Wikipedia, 2006).

Overall, the conceptions can also be understood from the quality cycle, which involves in most cases: plan, act/implementation, evaluate/performance assessment, and improve/ revision and updating in line with the quality assurance system, which is an on going process by which an institution and its different sections and programs monitor and confirm that the conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set. It, nonetheless, should not be considered as something installed like a new computer; rather it is a learning process; it is implanted.

Opportunities for Quality Assurance in HEIs

It is evident from the conceptions that quality is a multidimensional concept. It embraces all HE functions and activities: teaching and academic programs, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment. Consequently, all the aspects concerning quality influence the image of a particular institution and the intrinsic quality of its function. Such recognition has served as an opportunity to identify for performance indicators. Performance indicator is the concept that with quality assessment has become international issue since the late 1970s to serve as signals, guides or as points of reference for making national or international comparisons in educational quality, effectiveness, and efficiency; and for comparing quality or performance against peers over time, or achievement against a desired objective (UNESCO, 1998a, b; Kells 1993, cited in Firdissa, 2007, 2006.a).

The 1980s were distinguished by the growth of the movement toward assessment and accountability in many countries, mainly USA. Along with the movement was a rising interest in the quality of undergraduate education followed by the 1990s, which emerged as part of another era awaiting further definition. This was followed by a heightened tempo in the use of performance indicators by sharing from state to state in the USA followed by greater centralization of authority and the need for public accountability. This in turn shined out the importance of quality assessment, which is about: a) learning and sharing the lessons of that learning; b) crossing boundaries; c)

constructing bridges; d) confronting vested interests; and e) accepting changes as seen through critical and sometimes skeptical eyes *(*Brennaan and Shah, 2000, cited in Firdissa, 2006.a).

It can be concluded from this quotation and from the implied intents that in coordinating and managing quality assurance process, communicating the approach, empowering operational areas, emphasizing a process of continual improvement, and ensuring links with decision-making bodies are critical success factors as per the identified indicators.

For many European countries, quality indicators come under the areas of attainment, success and transition, monitoring of school education, and resources and structures. Others consider schools with very effective self-evaluation as having: strong leadership; shared aims; engagement of key stakeholders in self-evaluation and improvement activities; well set out and clearly communicated policies and guidelines; self-evaluation activities that focused on learning, teaching and improving outcomes; strong staff commitment to self-evaluation; monitoring and evaluation processes that were systematic, rigorous and robust; well-planned action to develop and improve provision; a beneficial balance between external support and challenge from local authorities and/or national inspectorates and internal quality assurance, and; a generally strong infrastructure of national or local support for self-evaluation as a process (SICI, 2003: 125, in Maria, 2006).

For classifying universities and affiliated institutions, therefore, there are at least five performance indicators:
- Institution's reputation;
- Quality of institutional resources (lecturers, students, facilities, etc), in which case the classification lays emphasis on resources instead of productivity;
- Value of external achievements: here, the classification is based, among others, on the lecturer's personal involvement in the professional career of graduates, etc;
- Nature and scope of curricula; and

- Performance in terms of skill development (UNESCO, 1998 a, cited in Firdissa, 2007.a).

The same source further acknowledges that the quality of higher educational system may also be assessed on the basis of three parameters: relevance of certificates awarded; value of the knowledge produced; and its impact on the socio-cultural environment through university extension activities.

The opportunities for HE quality can also be seen in line with the envisaged role of the sector to prepare students to become well informed and deeply motivated citizens, who can think critically, analyze problems of society, look for solutions to the problems of society, apply them and accept social responsibilities (UNESCO, 1998b, cited in Firdissa, 2007.a). The objective of HE in Ethiopia aligns with this reality: to produce skilled manpower in quantity and quality that will serve the country in different professions (FDRE, 2003, Article 6(1). Article 6(6), of the same document also states that one of the objectives of HE is to "lay down an institutional system that ensures the accountability of the institutions". Higher education envisaged central in the Capacity Building Program of the country emphasizing human resource development, improving working systems and institutional setup to facilitate decentralization, democratization and the overall Agricultural Development-Led Industry (MOE, 2002).

Investment in HE, thus, is considered decisive for socio-economic development through sustained poverty reduction and the future of the country. The overall strategy followed within the National Capacity Building Program of Ethiopia, therefore, is to provide good quality higher education in larger numbers, with diminishing dependence on public resources in the longer term (MOE, 2002).

In line with this, the need for having an effective quality assurance capacity at the national and institutional levels has resulted in establishing Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), Higher Education Strategy Center (HESC) both at national level and Academic Development

and Resource Center (ADRC) at all the 9 already functioning public Universities. Particularly, HERQA (externally) and ADRC (internally) are instrumental to enhance and sustain the relevance and the quality of HE in the country.

Being accountable to the Ministry of Education, HERQA, among others, will:

- ensure that education and trainings offered at any HEI are up to standard, relevant and have quality; and are in line with economic, social and other appropriate policies of the country;
- examine the application submitted to the Ministry for (pre-) accreditation permit, and renewal of accreditation permit in accordance with the proclamation and other relevant laws, and submit its recommendations thereon to the Ministry within three months;
- evaluate the institutions at least once every five years with a view to ensuring whether such institutions are up to standard and competent, and submit its findings to the Ministry;
- supervise the standards and competence of the institution; and consult the Ministry pertaining to the merger or division of an institution in accordance with Art.44 of the proclamation;
- give information to the public about the current situation and status of the institution periodically; and
- gather and disseminate information about the standards and programs of study offered by foreign higher education institutions as well as about their general status (FDRE, 2003).

Among others, HERQA basis institutional quality and relevance audit on 10 focus areas, namely, vision, mission and educational goals; governance and management system; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; student 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.

On the basis of these foci areas, HEIs are expected to carry out institutional self-evaluation to justify the quality and relevance of the teaching, research and services they render. Internal quality assurance, therefore, is the means through which a specific university confirms that the conditions are in place, and ensures that quality is a focus of all the activities of the university community and is incorporated into their everyday work. To this effect, the ADRCs are established in all the universities to achieve the objectives of promoting quality education in their respective universities through supporting quality assessment and research on academic programs and providing advisory services, conducting staff development to promote professional and research skills of the academic staffs, and providing services pertaining to the improvement of quality and relevance in the pertinent university.

Even though there is a possibility to morph by each of the HEIs, the main functions of the ADRCs are Quality Care, staff development, and professional resource and service. The center also trains staffs to incorporate crosscutting issues such as gender, HIV/AIDS, special needs, and environmental protection into their teaching.

Particularly, the Quality Care Unit is entrusted with supporting departments, faculties, schools, and/or colleges in quality care matters. It assists in quality policy formulation, in the provision of assessment instruments, in quality advocacy and most important – by arranging staff training for departmental and faculty roles in quality assurance.

In comparison with the roles of comparable centers in other countries like South Africa, UK, and the Netherlands, however, the ADRCs in Ethiopian HEIs have limited roles. As an instance, at the Universities of Pretoria and Johannesburg in South Africa there is a totally separate Quality Assurance Unit which is closely associated with strategic planning in the university (matching performance to mission and vision), is run by experienced staff working in close liaison with top university management, and also liaises with

external audit agency (HEQC) and coordinates auditors' visits (EQUIP, 2006, cited in Firdissa, 2006.a).

In Ethiopia, however, whereas the overall responsibility for quality care lies fully on the faculties, colleges, schools, and departments, ADRCs have the following roles with regard to quality.

- support the improvement of quality of education;
- collaborate with other units in working and proposing new policies or improve existing ones based on the status report;
- suggest intervention measures based on weaknesses and shortcomings identified in the annual/biannual report;
- liaise with HERQA through the Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs (AVPAA) or AVP regarding the assessment of academic programs;
- provide support for the AVPAA in developing institutional policies; and
- render technical and professional services where and when required.

Challenges

The opportunities for sustaining quality in HEIs are not with out risks and/or challenges. This sub-section, therefore, tries to answer a question "what challenges are there for HE quality assurance?" The answer, at the simplest level, starts from the ambiguity to precisely define quality indicators, as there is no consensus upon their roles. Compounding this challenge is that practitioners in countries like ours have low or no say on critical matters to sustain quality by identifying the indicators and assessing their own classroom practices for the better (Firdissa, 2006.a).

More specifically, the following are some of the challenges.

- The limited role of performance indicators in quality assessment;
- Criteria and standards for quality are subject to negotiation;
- Quality, with its indicators, is a matter of negotiation between parties involved;
- Mismatch between the perceptions of parties in the discussion on performance indicators;

- The term 'performance indicator' itself is very confusing;
- Performance indicators have different functions;
- Transformation from indicators into standards may not be feasibly specific;
- Risks to adopt one quality assessment model;
- The number of the HE quality indicators is numerous compared to that of industry;
- Emphasizing enrollment and graduating figures at the expense of quality; and
- Low empowerment and commitment of the first line implementers to take ownership of sustaining the quality of their practices.

Specifically, in Ethiopia, whereas the establishment of HERQA, HESC, EQUIP and ADRCs are opportunities for quality assurance in Ethiopian HEIs, many challenges are left untouched and are peculiar to Ethiopia for assuring quality. These could be, among others, due to the rapid enrollment expansion, which inevitably brings poorly prepared students into the system, scarcity of resources to match the expansion endeavors, and low proportion of qualified academic staff for the expansion.

In addition to emphasizing enrollment and graduating figures at the expense of quality, very little conscious efforts have been made in Ethiopia to characterize Higher Education by its international dimension: exchange of knowledge, interactive networking, mobility of teachers and students, and international research projects, while taking into account the national cultural values and circumstances with a purpose to promoting and managing international co-operation and as an essential part of the quality and relevance of HE (UNESCO, 1998b, cited in Firdissa, 2007.a).

Concluding Remarks

It can be learnt from the discussions made so far that this era is a time of both opportunity and challenge for quality. Whereas matters of quality are the agendas of all countries including ours, there, however, remains a long

journey to fine tune appropriate indicators and put the front line implementers into commitment for the ownership of the quality. The establishment of different quality agencies and system support units and the affirmative actions mainly by HERQA in addition to the global attentions could be opportunities to Ethiopian HEIs' quality assurance endeavors and yet, the challenges outweigh.

The fact that there is no universal consensus on specific indicators and on how best to measure quality in higher education has remarkable implications on the attempts to sustain quality in Ethiopian HEIs in the midst of the expansion endeavors with low empowerment and commitment of the first line implementers (staffs).

When we evaluate Ethiopian HEIs against what UNESCO (1998:184, cited in Firdissa, 2007.a) has outlined, institution's reputation; Quality of institutional resources; Value of external achievements; Nature and scope of curricula; Performance in terms of skill development, many Ethiopian universities, specifically the Addis Ababa University has a well-established reputation. There, however, is very low conscious effort to empower the academic staff and also to retain experienced and capable academic staff through out the country.

Consequently, in the process of HE expansion in the country, a number of new problems, never imagined hitherto, have arisen, and other long-lived challenges have become more serious than ever before as the practices in Ethiopia imply that there is intention to derive quality from quantity. Compounding the problem is that there is lack of HE staff empowerment, support, incentive systems, recognition, clear policies and guidelines to link teaching with research; unavailability of explicit plan to internationalize programs of HEIs, and staff members' low commitment and conviction to assertively strive to improve their professional practices (Firdissa, 2006.a).

In such a situation, our universities could hardly succeed to ensure high quality of international standing that is characterized by exchange of

knowledge, interactive networking, mobility of teachers and students, and international research projects, while taking into account issues of national concern including decentralization and democratization processes.

This calls for our firm stand to be committed in meeting both present and potential needs of different level stakeholders including global market, to be driven more by self-regulation and less by external accountability, giving place for continuous improvement in line with the needs of new entrants and stakeholders, to find answers not only for what works, but also for what is acceptable nationally and internationally; and to redefine and recapitulate indicators of quality for our HEIs in line with the changing landscape of Higher Education globally and nationally.

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