

Quality Higher Education for Public Service Reform: Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Quality Higher Education is a prime driver for public service and its reform intents. The country's Higher Education quality has, nonetheless, remained the concern of many stakeholders let alone to properly support the public service reform. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to investigate the roles of quality higher education for public service reform by exploring available opportunities, challenges and prospects. A qualitative approach was employed to generate data by reviewing documents; and by conducting- interviews with five purposely selected officials, and -focus group discussions with nine PhD students studying at Addis Ababa University. The results have shown that there are internal and external opportunities for catalysing the role of quality higher education for public services reform by producing knowledgeable, skilful and enlightened workforce and leaders. Internally, Ethiopia has formulated different policies, strategies, frameworks, and roles and responsibilities. Externally, there has been a global renewed enthusiasm for quality higher education brought about by the quest for accountability, interconnectedness, globalization, and networked designs. There, however, are challenges threatening the quality of the sector, including, rapid expansion with unmatched resources, top leadership loose commitment to quality, quantitative driven efforts, some HEIs' unpreparedness for changes and pressures, and anomalies in board and student assignments to universities. The findings imply that all parties should make concerted efforts to build Higher Education quality assurance system on a sound foundation beyond piecemeal and quantitative gains by putting in place systemic and systematic strategies so that the sector ascertains its role of supporting public service reform for its intent of efficiency, effectiveness, and adding values for money.

Keywords: *Quality, Higher Education, Public Service Reform, Opportunities, Challenges*

Conceptual and Theoretical Background

The study dealt with investigating the role of Quality Higher Education (QHE) for Public Service Reform. Whereas QHE encompasses aspects of input, process, output and impact; public service reform deals with deliberate changes in structures, processes, governance, and bureaucracies; injecting new ideas, strategies, procedures, and tasks; and coping with the uncertainties and rapid environmental changes with the ultimate goal of enhancing efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness of the organization (Abolo, 2019). The required changes, injections, and coping mechanisms as well as the ensuing efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness are enabled by quality education. Basically, quality in education encompasses aspects related to 1) learners' wellbeing, 2) Conducive learning environment, 3) curricula and program relevance, 4) appropriate pedagogy, and 5) realistic graduate

outcomes with saleable knowledge, skills and attitudes that “are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society” (UNICEF, 2000:3). Particularly, QHE empowers graduates who would become employees (civil servants) of public services to be righteous and innovative professionals-being equipped with relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Empowered workforces of public service institutions profoundly engage in deliberate planning of reform initiatives, improvements, and subsequent implementations towards achievement of roles, and ascertaining effectiveness and efficiency in core mandates in a systemic and sustainable manner (Abolo, 2029:2, citing Caiden 1978; 1978; 1980).

Higher education Institution (HEI), to effectively empower employees (civil servants), should itself, have a proper quality and Quality Assurance (QA) system both of which are slippery to precisely conceptualize. Defining and conceptualizing quality and QA remain a difficult task. Specifically, quality is a common day word but with less precise meaning. Its meanings are purposive, utilitarian, conformance, situational and are consensual (Firdissa, 2009). Different educators have tried to conceptualize quality from their purposes, uses, conformances, situations and perspectives. Based on a review of literature, Schindler et.al. (2015:6-7), for instance, developed a conceptual model (Figure 1) of quality that illustrates the interrelationships between “a broad strategy to target central goals and outcomes and a specific strategy to identify quality indicators that can be used to assess whether the identified goals and outcomes have been achieved”.



Figure 1. Conceptual model of quality depicting broad and specific strategies for defining quality (source: Schindler et.al. 2015:7)

It also requires careful consideration of various stakeholder perspectives. Citing Bobby (2014) and Cullen et al. (2003), the authors have shown indicated that the core of the model reflects the importance of eliciting stakeholder perspectives, which should drive the definition of quality and the indicators used to measure quality. The next portion of the model contains four broad conceptualizations of

quality (quality as purposeful, transformative, exceptional, and accountable). The outer portion of the model contains examples of quality indicators that could be used to assess each of the broad conceptualizations. The authors have also summarised that the model depicts the importance of a multifaceted approach to defining quality, which requires eliciting stakeholder perspectives to develop a broad conceptualization of quality and to accurately select specific indicators to measure that conceptualization of quality.

Thorough understanding of the interrelationships between the broad and specific strategies can serve as a prerequisite for defining QA, which is conceptualized differently by different educators. For Brown (2004:173, citing HEQC, 1994:61), QA is all about “those planned and systematic activities to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy requirements for quality”. It is “an on-going process where the interaction between the internal and external processes is essential and where a multifaceted and transparent approach seems essential and where the constant dialogue ensures that the stakes do not encourage a compliance culture” (Smidt, 2015:635-6). For Firdissa (2018:12), QA “...is a deliberate, systematic, unending and incessant process and action of guaranteeing the system to provide adequate confidence about the inputs, processes and outputs of the dimensions of the university functions. Above all, QA within the university culture is doing the right things right (Ibid).

There are also authors that conceptualize quality and QA by making distinctions with- and/or relating to- other related terms. For instance, OECD (2014) differentiate quality as a *concept* from quality as a *mechanism*; and *quality culture* from *quality assurance*. Citing Ehlers (2009), OECD (2014:20) indicates that “[w]hereas quality assurance processes are something tangible and manageable by institutional decisions, the cultural aspect of quality...– shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment—is far more difficult to change”.

Furthermore, OECD (2014:22, citing Harvey, 2004) conceives QA “as a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfills expectations or measures up to the minimum requirements. This is a very broad definition that encompasses various tools, measures and levers. In practice, quality assurance activities take many forms and cover a wide spectrum of processes designed to monitor, maintain and enhance quality (OECD, 2008; OECD, 2014). OECD (2014:22) further indicates that “[d]istinguishing between summative and formative approaches is a common classification in quality assurance”. As the same source citing Weber, Mahfooz and Hovde (2010) indicates, “the formative approach monitors an institution’s performance and encourages it to identify strengths and deficiencies and develops strategies to address them. The summative approach, on the other hand, judges whether an institution meets certain criteria” (Ibid. p.22).

Others relate QA to “the closely related concepts of quality enhancement, quality culture, evaluation, accreditation, accountability, transparency and transparency tools (Smidt, 2015:632). Particularly, QA and Quality Enhancement (QE) are closely related and cannot be separated from one another. As McGhee (2003:2) indicates,

[he]we cannot fully understand the nature of QE unless we recognize that it is often about ensuring that innovation, development, progress and change are not compromising the core aims and standards of a learning program. Equally we cannot fully understand QA without considering how the setting, monitoring and review of

academic standards if done effectively should automatically highlight opportunities for development and improvement.

This shows that QA and QE are tightly related wherein a focus on QA can promote QE. Though mismanaged QA undermines QE, “QE should not be attempted until QA is secure” (McGhee, 2003:2). In explaining “the quality concerns of the 90s” of European higher education, vis-à-vis knowledge-intensive economies and societies that moved [reformed] HEIs, their problems and challenges, to the foreground, EUA (2008:5) also indicates that “Quality enhancement became a charged theme, and quality assurance its key guarantor”.

For EUA (2008:5) “[q]uality enhancement is the sum of many methods of institutional development, ranging from competitive hiring procedures, creating appropriate funding opportunities, to facilitating communication between disciplines and supporting innovative initiatives through institutional incentives”.

Therefore, quality is about always trying to do things right first time and every time, rather than occasionally checking if they have gone wrong (Sallis, 2002). In synthesis, therefore, quality assurance deals with a process of putting in place systems and mechanisms that guarantee the eminence of inputs, processes, outcomes, and beyond with a purpose fulfilling all stakeholders’ expectations and boosting their confidence.

Problem Statement

Whereas QHE is a key driver for the effectiveness and efficiency of the public service sector by producing skillful, knowledgeable and enlightened workers and leaders, the HES and its quality are facing unprecedented challenges. Some of the challenges have happened as a direct result of HE expansion and unmatched resources, whereas others are due to internal and external changes accompanied by environmental unpredictability and unpreparedness of the sector for the changes.

In the same vein, regardless of the widespread awareness about the role of QHE for public service reform by producing the required workforce, there is no inclusive study that brings the two together—quality higher education and public service sector reform. A few of the existing attempts are on any one of the two perse: some on HE quality, others on public service reform. This study is, therefore, necessary as it has explored the roles of QHE for public service reform along with the available opportunities, challenges and prospects. It, hopefully, brings considerate understanding and insights among pertinent stakeholders to eventually put in place a public service sector reform that puts in place reasonable accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency in service delivery, transparency, and contribution to the overall development endeavors of the country.

The study, therefore, aimed at investigating the roles of QHE for public service reform, available opportunities, challenges and prospects. The study raised a question: *what are the Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects for QHE that can drive Public Service Reform in Ethiopian Context?*”

Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative approach to generate both secondary and primary data. Whereas the secondary data were generated by reviewing policies, guidelines, and literatures; the primary data were secured by conducting interviews with five purposively selected officials (3 from the Ministry of Education, and 2 from Addis Ababa University); and conducting focus discussions with nine PhD students studying at AAU who were actually employees of other five Universities. The interviewees as well as the discussants were selected purposefully to get tangible information “from the horse’s mouth” as those at the MOE were at the forefront on formulating QHE policy, and those at AAU were

the frontline implementers of the policy. Equally, the nine discussants had been the frontline implementers of the policy at their respective universities, and were also the ones who could witness the level of QHE while they were pursuing their PhD at AAU. In the same vein, the choice of just five officials, and nine PhD students was purely purposive and availability. Whereas the five officials were believed to have reasonable understanding about QHE due to their roles at their respective offices, the choice of the nine PhD students was just availability to get different views as they were basically from five different universities in the country.

Similarly, the choice of a purely qualitative approach was with the purpose to understand and interpret the interrelationships among the varying aspects of QHE and public service reform along with the available opportunities, challenges and portending future directions. As there is no inclusive study that brings the two together-quality higher education and public service sector reform, the use of qualitative approach has helped the researcher to uncover new insights, views, and thoughts about the roles of QHE for public service reform along with available opportunities, challenges and prospects.

All sorts of data-obtained from the reviews, interviews, and FGDs have been interspersed and used in the Results section leading to conclusions and recommendations. In the journey of the study, efforts were made to protect the identities of the participants- both individuals and institutions by using codes, and by maintaining anonymity of the data sources, both of which align with many ethical practices in researching Higher Education in the Ethiopian context. The coding of the interviewees and that of the FGDs was made as soon as the data were collected. Coding of the interviewees was made bringing the codes of the roles/place of work and the interviewees together as Int1, Int2, Int3, Int4, and Int5 standing respectively for MOE (ETA1), MOE(ETA2), MOE (head office), AAU1, and AAU2. On the other hand, just *FGDs* was used as a collective name in reference to the discussions with the nine students pursuing their PhD at AAU.

Results

This section presents analysis results of the data obtained from reviewing policies, guidelines, and literatures; and conducting interviews and focus discussions on the roles of QHE for public service reform, opportunities, challenges and prospects.

Opportunities for QHE

Questions related to opportunities for QHE that can drive public service reform have been explored through document reviews, interviews, and FGDS. From the reviews, interviews, and discussions it has been learnt that Ethiopia with the purpose to produce quality workforce necessary for its overall development endeavours, has made unprecedented efforts to expand its Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) resulting in a remarkable increase in programs, student enrolments as well as academic staffs. Following the expansion and resultant quality concerns, the country has legislated HE quality assurance specific policies, guidelines, strategies, frameworks, and roles and responsibilities.

It has been learnt from an interview with Int4 and a document scrutiny that Ethiopian HE QA has become a common agenda of the different stakeholders as a result of which reform initiatives in programs, curricula, governance and assessment modalities of the HE sector have been intensified nationally and at all HEIs in the country. Int3 also indicated that the “government’s commitment to stand answerable to the public by enhancing quality” has inspired different stakeholders because of which different reform deliberations and exchange of experiences took place at different levels and different times. Int1, Int2, and Int3 also indicated that the country has designed various strategies, constituted national and institutional level policies, guidelines, and made efforts to reform programs, curricula, and brought to the fore discourses towards innovative teaching methods.

As part of its commitment for QHE, the country has also put in place different organs nationally as well as institutional to ascertain its intents. Among others, establishing a national HE Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA, currently named as Education and Training Authority, ETA as of 2022); Higher Education Strategy Centre (HESC) (now dissolved), and institutionally Academic Resource Centre (ADRC) at all HEIs functioning prior to 2015; the Consortium of Public Universities at national level; Consortium of Colleges and Universities at regional level; and Education Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP) in early 2005 exhibit the efforts made by the country at different times to reform the HE sector to meet the demands of the day and to produce skilful, knowledgeable and enlightened leaders and works for the public service efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, Clustering HEIs to support each other; introducing Higher Diploma Program (HDP) at all HEIs as of 2006; and nationally developing a Qualifications Framework, and prompting HEIs to produce their respective guidelines and implement along with the national level also signify the efforts made to the sector, which in turn serve as opportunities for QHE to catalyse public service reform.

Globally also there have been opportunities that could substantiate the intents of QHE for public service reform owing to the fact that our time is witnessing: 1) a renewed enthusiasm for higher education, research, and innovation; 2) accountability to taxpayers by adding values for the bucks and for the bungs- leading to authentic transformation; 3) Interconnectedness, globalization, and networked designs all driving the role of HE for public services reform; and 4) there are appealing contexts and/or factors that stand as quests for HE quality assurance.

Along these, the efforts made by many countries including Ethiopia to plan and implement quality assurance initiatives stand as opportunities for QHE that can catalyse public service reform. A question was raised to the interviewees, and to the FGDs on what and how countries including Ethiopia have done on HE sector to go along with the new vision of the world including participating in knowledge-based economy within the scenarios of public service reform. Int5 replied that “universities have reformed programs and their durations” along with their respective counties’ public service requirements. He cited an initiative by Addis Ababa University (AAU) in 2012 with a slogan “*less is more*” by the then president of the University, and consequently reducing MA/MSC duration from two years to 18 months by truncating redundant contents and reforming delivery mechanisms (2014). Also, efforts were made to implement student-centred approach of teaching learning, continuous assessment, and to adopt European Credit Transfer system (ECTS). ECTS is one of the European consensus for student mobility, and the Bologna Process “for transfer and accumulation and the diploma supplement, all to increase transparency and flexibility” (Smidt, 2015:633). ECTS is sought to enable students achieve the expected learning outcomes (i.e., what they should know, or be

able) as it is based on the workload they need to accomplish at specified level. Ethiopia has sought ECTS to maintain standard, attainment and performance of students across HEIs in the country.

I added that AAU tried to revitalize lines of accountability and answerability to the public, to upgrade skills of the university community, to gear the university functions towards results orientation and efficiency, to put in place new modalities on staff evaluation and staff career development, to decentralize governance down to the lowest academic units-departments, centres and program units.

Alongside these, a series of training programs, experience sharing tours to different countries including UK, USA, Germany, Netherlands, Australia, South Korea, China, etc. have catalyzed the quest for HE quality assurance in Ethiopia (Int2). The interviewee further indicated that he was one of those who got training, and experience sharing tours to the USA, Korea, and China. Int1 also had the view that “capacity building initiatives have become the means of learning, sharing knowledge, and taking care of the standards including quality assurance initiatives in which different parties put hands in funding, training, experience sharing, producing documents, etc.”.

The quests for HE QA by Ethiopia has also been attached to reform processes and/or movements by European countries and/or Bologna, UNESCO, the World Bank, and regional and global goals and consensuses to expand quality HE as a result of the changing economic, social, political, and environmental dynamisms worldwide.

A discussion with the FGDs has also shown that the current opportunities to HE stand as quests for QA. The FGDS’ views in most cases concur with that of the interviewees. A synthesis from the two subjects on the opportunities for QHE that can catalyse public service reform include:

1. Ethiopia’s trust in HE as a tool for development and poverty eradication;
2. The country’s ambition to learn from other industrialized and middle-income countries by transferring technology;
3. The need to prepare quality workforce for the country’s development priority areas;
4. Possibility to secure fund for QA endeavours from donors;
5. Possibility of presenting seminars, workshops, and conference papers at different forums and learning from others;
6. Availability of mobility of students and staff through scholarships, and different programs;
7. The increasing awareness about QA among HE community, the society, and the industry;
8. Capacity building initiatives; *and*
9. Utilization of educational technologies, including YouTube, Google, telegram and other mobile cells and computers.

Notably, Ethiopia has given the HE sector a central position in its efforts to eradicate poverty and to stand a middle-income country soon. Part of this endeavour is concerned with improving the quality and employability of university graduates. In this line of thought, In5 indicated that “the country’s development strategies, policies, and programs have targeted enhancing the quality of the HE functions: teaching, training, research and services geared to sustainable development efforts of the nation”. This then stood as a plea for quality, relevance, and efficiency in Higher Education; technology transfer; and results-based development endeavours. Inherent within Higher Education Proclamations 2003, 2009, and 2019 is the pronouncement of the agenda of QA because of which quality assurance system has been establishing a nationally as well as institutionally.

Challenges to QHE

Nowadays, a number of challenges affect the quality of HEIs, and consequently dwindle HE's roles to support public service reform. An interview conducted with Int3 and a synthesis from a scrutiny of different sources show that there are a plethora of challenges threatening HE quality. The challenges emanate from internal as well as external pressures. Internally, HEIs' unpreparedness for the rapid changes in technology, digitalization, and student and societal expectations; and externally the rapid changes in technology, digitalization, climate, internationalization, business environment, increased competition, and a shift from industrialized to knowledge-based societies (Int2 and FGDs). Both-internal and external pressures, in one way or another, affect HEIs' successes in assuring their quality.

Discussions made with some interviewees and the discussants converge on some internal challenging factors, including, rapid HE expansion; lack of instructional-led systematic and systematic handling of the sector; quantitative driven planning, implementation and reporting (quantitative gains by enrolling and graduating students) with low or no concern for quality; loose management commitment to quality initiatives owing to the fact that many HE leaders are busy in political commitments, and fire-fighting; unpredictability in the politics; and some HEIs' meager readiness to overcome pressures from internationalization, diverse demands, accelerated changes in business environment, increased competition, technological changes, and a shift from industrialized to knowledge-based societies-all of which, in one way or another, affect HEIs' successes in assuring quality (FGDs, Int1, Int2, Int3 & Int5).

Furthermore, Int4 indicated that many of the HE activities are "quantitative driven rather than qualitative". Int5 also had the view that "many of the HE activities are geared towards massive enrolment, sizable graduation, publication and reporting quantity, and durations and frequencies of meetings and deliberations rather than dwelling on matters quality and/or academic excellence". One of the common challenges that the interviewees and the FGDs expressed was the rapid expansion of the HE sector and the unparalleled resources and unpreparedness of some HEIs. The subjects had the view that mainly resource limitation vis-à-vis the expansions had affected the institutions' efforts to lay QA foundations and contribute its fair share for public service reform.

Specifically, Int3 and the FGDs indicated that the expansion of HEIs in Ethiopia has created tensions in meeting quality demands, and in fulfilling learning facilities, and availing adequate quality academic staff for all disciplines and programs. In the same vein, Int4 and Int5 attributed the challenges to the HE expansion that has resulted in shortage of adequate classrooms, laboratories, workshops, dormitories, dining rooms and other facilities; ineffective university governance; meager staff and student engagement and commitment; problematic structural positioning; and inefficiencies in implementing the available guidelines. The FGDs further hinted that the impact of the expansion had brought lowly qualified staff and poorly prepared students, absence of vibrant research culture among staff, and the country's limitations in financial and material provisions. These have persisted as direct and/or indirect challenges to assure quality in Ethiopian HEIs.

There are also recent anomalies in governance board and student assignment/placements, and laxity in respecting the medium of instruction at some HEIs-all of which have jeopardized quality, and consequently dwindled stakeholders' confidence towards the country's HE system's quality assurance, and its contributions to public service reform. As learnt from Int4 and Int5 indicated that whereas board assignment did not consider pragmatic merit-based selection, students were also

assigned to distant universities without their will and used to be exposed to extra expenses and safety concerns.

Int1 also attributed the failure for quality to “loose leadership commitment to quality initiatives and lack of ownership by HEIs’ communities of the nationally cascaded QA frameworks”. Int1 added that many of the HEIs, nowadays, lack visionary leaders. Many leaders just expect directions to come from the Ministry of Education (MOE) rather than owning and taking initiatives to plan, implement and accountably report to the public. The interviewee had the view that many of the HEIs in Ethiopia were overwhelmed by unplanned routine tasks and short-term transactions rather than focusing on strategizing their respective mission, vision, and values. In the same vein, Int5 indicated that QA efforts in Ethiopian HEIs are political- oriented, creating and emphasizing a compliance culture to nationally instigated policies and strategies, and focusing on surveillance and control rather than transformation.

MOE (2018) has also attributed the challenges that affected HE quality to fiascos in curriculum planning, teaching learning, and assessment; and cheating among students during exams. The same source (p. 53) further indicates that

[t]he curricula of HEIs are not geared toward the development of employability and other lifelong learning skills among graduates. Universities did not seem having strategies and tactics to prepare programs requiring intensive use of IT for learning purposes. The existing university-industry linkage was found inadequate hence students did not have ample exposure to real-world of work as well as the teaching of practitioners from industry.

The views of Int4 and Int5 converge on the anomalies in situating QA structure in Ethiopian HEIs. Int4 specifically indicated that “whereas HEIs are expected to teach, conduct research, and deliver services, some universities have created quality units to oversee the works of others, not their own”. Int5 also indicated that, “in some universities the practices of QA are separated from normal duties of the academics and leaders”. The interviewees had the view that the detached quality assurance teams would be more focused on documentations, and reporting compliances and the level of the efforts of everything rather than quality enhancement and improvement in pragmatic and owned manner. In such a case, ownership and purposive QA were missing.

Discussions

This study has been conducted with the mindset that QHE is a driver for efficient and effective public service reform by preparing trained manpower with the necessary knowledge, skills, and virtues. It is believed that HE drives public service by producing workforces who are life-long learners, problem solvers, creative thinkers, and effective communicators. Opportunities, challenges, and prospects of QHE to drive public service reform have been qualitatively examined using both secondary and primary data. Consequently, several opportunities have been identified. Among others, unprecedented efforts were made to expand HEIs resulting in a remarkable increase in programs, student enrolments, and staff at all levels. Along this, Ethiopia’s ambitious efforts to design and to enact various HE quality assurance specific policies, strategies, guidelines, frameworks, and roles and responsibilities; and to reform programs, curricula, teaching methods, and assessment modalities created awareness and necessity for QHE.

Consequently, HE quality has become a common agenda of different reform initiatives resulting in being put in place:

- 1) a national HE Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA, currently named as Education and Training Authority, ETA as of 2022);
- 2) Higher Education Strategy Centre (HESC) (now dissolved);
- 3) Academic Development Centre (ADRC) at all HEIs functioning prior 2015 in Ethiopia (now dissolved);
- 4) Consortium of Public Universities at national level;
- 5) Consortium of Colleges and Universities at regional level;
- 6) Education Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP) in early 2005;
- 7) Higher diploma Program (HDP) at all HEIs as of 2006;
- 8) Nationally developing a Qualifications Framework;
- 9) Clustering HEIs to support one another; and
- 10) Institutional efforts to produce their respective guidelines and implement along with the national initiatives.

Following the national reform initiatives and efforts, many HEIs in Ethiopia have reformed their programs and their durations along with the demands of the trained man power of the country for public service requirements; implemented the principles of effectiveness and efficiency in their programs and student-cantered approach of teaching learning, and continuous assessment; and adopted European Credit Transfer system (ECTS) with the purpose to maintain standard, attainment and performance of students across HEIs in the country.

More specifically, AAU made efforts to revitalize lines of accountability and answerability to the public, to upgrade skills of its staffs, to gear the university's functions towards results orientation and efficiency, to put in place new modalities on staff evaluation and staff career development, training, experience sharing tours to different countries including UK, USA, Germany, Netherlands, Australia, Korea, China, etc. These all have catalysed the quest for HE quality assurance in Ethiopia and contribution for public sector reform.

Globally also, there are opportunities to ascertain QHE intent for public service reform along with the revitalized expectations from the HE sector and the need for accountability and answerability. The Ethiopian as well as the global scenarios have, therefore, infused the role of QHE for public service reform resulting in the need to:

- 1) stand answerable to the global HE development,
- 2) put in place comparable programs across different institutions and/or countries,
- 3) secure lessons from quality assurance reforms at advanced institutions elsewhere,
- 4) achieve the new HE demand alongside the change in economic landscape demanding quality workforce,
- 5) respond to the public outcry for quality following HE expansion,
- 6) pace with the knowledge based economic landscape, and
- 7) address the emerged private HEIs with diverse disciplines.

The country's trust in the role of HE and research for development and poverty reduction has demanded quality workforce. Consequently, QA has been sought to contribute for: 1) human resource development alongside the country's vision to attain a middle income level in the years to come; 2) developing multi-ethnic democratic cultures and improving national productivity; and 3) reducing poverty and to lay foundations of good governance-all of which contribute towards driving public service reform endeavours.

There, however, are a plethora of challenges affecting the quality of the HE sector and limiting its contribution to public service reform. Remarkably, shortage of resources due to the rapid expansion of HEIs, which has also brought unqualified staff, poorly prepared students, and absence of vibrant research culture. The case is also exacerbated by the global economic/financial crises, globalization, and demographic changes along with the pressures from technological changes/digital learning environments. The country's HE sector is, therefore, witnessing lack of instructional-led systematic and systematic handling by visionary and committed leadership to quality initiatives, lack of ownership by HEIs' communities of the nationally initiated quality matters, and anomalies in governance board and student assignment/placements, and laxity in respecting the medium of instruction at some HEIs-all of which have jeopardized quality, and consequently dwindled stakeholders' confidence towards the country's HE system's quality assurance, and its eventual contributions to the public service reform. Many of the country's HEIs have also detached, structurally, quality assurance units from actual duties of teaching, research, and services and put just as an entity to oversee the duties of others.

Consequently, many of the country's HEIs are overwhelmed by unplanned routine tasks and short-term transactions rather than focusing on strategizing their respective mission, vision, and values. Moreover, quantitative moves with low or no concern for quality; and a compliance culture to nationally maneuvered demands focusing on surveillance and control rather than transformation have affected the quality of the sector.

Furthermore, the HEIs' skimpy readiness for the rapid changes in technology, digitalization, student and societal expectations; for the demands of internationalization, business environment, increased competition, and a shift from industrialized to knowledge-based societies- in one way or another, have affected HEIs' successes in assuring quality. This in turn, obscured many of the HEIs in the country to be tied up in business-as-usual mind-set with routines and firefighting state of affairs, short of strategies to gear their programs and curricula towards boosting the graduates' employability, lifelong learning skills, and all-rounder active participation in the country's development endeavours.

Conclusions and Recommendations

With the purpose to investigate the Roles of QHE for public service reform, available opportunities, challenges and prospects were explored. The fact that a number of opportunities were observed ascertains the country's ambitious moves to produce trained workforce for its emerging economy and to pace along with the global developments resulted in expanding its HEIs, which in turn demanded legislating HE quality assurance specific national legal policies and strategies, frameworks, and roles and responsibilities. In the same vein, the global renewed enthusiasm for QHE; a quest for accountability to taxpayers by adding values for the bucks and for the bungs; and interconnectedness, globalization, and networked designs also shed lights on the potential and actual catalysing roles of QHE for public services reform.

Contrary to this, however, the observed challenges attributed mainly to expansion, low leadership commitment, and shortage of resources created apprehension and dwindled public confidence regarding the roles of QHE for public service reform. The challenges have similarities with those in other countries. Smidt (2015:633), for instance, presents “a complex set of challenges for all European HEIs” emanating from expansion, technological changes/digital learning environments, globalization, financial crisis, demographic changes, economic crisis, and high youth unemployment rates. In the same vein, OECD (2014) indicates that the publicly witnessed declining HE quality following expansion of enrollees, shortage of resources to commensurate the expansion of enrollees, and inability to address the renewed and diversified needs of HE have triggered global thinking, planning and acting on HE quality assurance matters. Bakioğlu and Kurnaz (2009:10), on the other hand, indicate that lack of a research culture is one “important problem undermining research quality” in HEIs. The challenges threatened the quality of the sector and consequently bred public distrust in some HEIs’ curricula and program relevance, and their readiness to produce quality workforce for public service reform.

The fact that the quality of the HE sector itself is in a predicament, it is unlikely to harness sustained contribution of the sector for public service reform. The fact that the HES itself is facing a host of challenges calls for devising prospects, which quests for expediting the observed opportunities and halting the challenges to produce knowledgeable, skilful, and enlightened public services employees (civil servants) and leaders. This in turn calls for putting in place a sound quality assurance system, systemic and systematic strategies, pragmatically merit-based governing board and students’ assignment/allocation to universities and enhancing HEIs’ readiness to cope up with internal and external pressures. This in turn calls for leveraging the prospects with deliberate planning, implementing, and transforming the HE sector itself to meet the demands of the 21st century along with the global, national and local developments, and ultimately ascertaining viable public service reforms that bring efficient, effective and responsive governance system, which require repositioning or re-profiling of an organization (Caiden & Sundaram, 2004, 2004).

The findings imply that all parties should make concerted efforts to ascertain the catalytic roles of QHE for public service reform by building HE quality assurance system on a sound foundation beyond quantitative gains. The Government principally has the responsibility to ensure that HEIs are operating in the public interest, they are owned and worthy stewards of their public assets and are public resources to be owned by the nearby people. It has, therefore, been recommended that:

1. the Federal Government should revisit the way governing board, and students are assigned/allocated to universities. This calls for:
 - a. empowering the regional and city government lower structural echelons to own the governance of HEIs close to their vicinity by assigning pragmatically merit-based governing board and top leadership;
 - b. giving definite freedom to candidate students of HEIs to decide where to pursue their study rather than assigning them to faraway, the practice of which has been causing extra expenses and safety concerns to families;
2. the Ministry of Education revised conference paper should empower the HEIs in the country to make use of the available opportunities to put in place systemic and systematic strategies of guaranteeing the quality of all HE functions beyond piecemeal efforts;
3. universities in the country should:
 - a. align QA efforts with the regular duties of their respective communities by decentralizing both the governance and quality assurance teams down to the lowest academic units; and

- b. be watchful and make constant readiness to cope with the internal and external pressures and changes threatening the quality of their functions.

Limitations of the Study

Notwithstanding the efforts made to use qualitative approach to get in-depth understanding of the interviewees' and discussants' views, and to review available policies and guidelines; there are limitations to the study. First, due to exclusively using qualitative approach it was impossible to check the reliability of the data used. Equally, as the questions presented to the interviewees and the discussants were open-ended, it was difficult to categorize and to organize the data at micro level using subheadings beyond opportunities and challenges. Second, using only five purposively selected officials (3 from the Ministry of Education, and 2 from Addis Ababa University) also had its own limitations. Using more data sources and from different universities would lead more valid results. This, therefore, implies that future research on the issue should make use of mixed approach of research using diverse data sources, perspectives, and approaches.

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