



Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Boon or Bandwagon in Light of Quality Improvement?

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Abstract

Quality assurance has become a global issue crossing the cultural contexts of many higher education systems. However, questions still remain whether this notion underpins deeper quality improvement in instructional practice and student learning outcomes. In Africa, where there are rapidly growing and diversified higher education systems, the need to assure quality through external examiners, audits, subject reviews or benchmarking is evident, but it is not clear if quality and standards of education are improved as a consequence. This study examines whether the process and contents of quality assurance constitute a substantial means by which Ethiopian higher learning institutions improve the quality of teaching and learning. It also outlines the consequences of quality assurance and its associated factors. The study employed an evaluative case study that draws on a critical (emancipatory) paradigm of evaluation and reflective judgement, viewing through Perellon's (2007) conceptual framework. Results suggest the presence of some misalignment and inherent methodological flaws; and these have brought only partial benefits, and some unintended ill-effects. The root causes of these results, as illustrated in this article, are that there is a lack of primary focus and holistic thinking in a sense to effect deeper improvement, and a likelihood of hopping on a quality assurance bandwagon. This article offers a perspective on what must be done to bridge the prevailing gaps in quality assurance functions, and build a culture of quality to improve current practices.

Key words: Bandwagon effect; Ethiopia; higher education; quality assurance; quality improvement.

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Résumé

L'assurance qualité est devenue une question mondiale qui traverse les contextes culturels de beaucoup de systèmes d'enseignement supérieur ? Cependant, des questions subsistent encore sur le fait, ou non, que cette notion est le fondement de l'augmentation d'une plus grande qualité dans les pratiques d'instruction et l'apprentissage des étudiants. Le besoin d'assurer la qualité à travers des examinateurs externes, des audits, des revues de sujets ou l'étalonnage est évident, mais il n'est pas clair que la qualité et les normes de l'éducation soient améliorées comme conséquence. Cette étude examine si, oui ou non, le processus et les contenus de l'assurance qualité constituent un moyen significatif par lequel les institutions d'enseignement supérieur éthiopiennes améliorent la qualité de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage. Elle met aussi en lumière les conséquences de l'assurance qualité et ses facteurs associés. L'étude a utilisé une étude de cas évaluative qui s'inspire d'un paradigme essentiel (émancipatoire) de l'évaluation et du jugement réflexif, partant du cadre conceptuel de Perellon (2007). Les résultats suggèrent la présence d'un certain décalage et de lacunes méthodologiques inhérentes ; et ceux-ci ont amené que des bénéfices partiels et des effets négatifs inattendus. Les causes profondes de ces résultats, telles qu'illustrées dans cet article, sont qu'il existe une absence d'un objectif essentiel et une pensée holistique allant dans le sens d'effectuer des améliorations plus profonde et un gagne-pain à sauter dans le train de l'effet de foule de l'assurance qualité. Cet article offre une perspective sur ce qui doit être fait pour combler le fossé prévalent en termes de fonctions d'assurance qualité et construire une culture de la qualité pour améliorer les pratiques actuelles.

Mots clés : effet de foule; Ethiopie; enseignement supérieur; assurance qualité ; amélioration de la qualité.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Global Perspectives

Higher education in the twenty-first century has to cope with many inevitable challenges that emanate from economic globalisation, neo-liberal accountability, advancement in information communication technology (ICT), socio-political transformations, and so on (Marginson 2007). Additionally, it should be well-equipped to respond to local circumstances, and be able to create new opportunities by playing the key role for the growth and advancement of society (Hussey and Smith 2010).

Solutions to these tripartite pressures are sought through similar patterns of reform in the different national contexts, with possible variation in the responses which can be attributed to national and local circumstances (Perellon 2005). Research conducted across nine countries, including France, the

United States, South Africa, Indonesia, Israel, Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Vietnam, indicates that a common set of action repertoires, as well as, distinctive national and institutional contexts, have played key roles in responding to these pressures (Goastellec 2008).

Over the years, the widening of higher education has become compelling internationally (Altbach 2008). This global trend is partly embedded within a broader reshuffling of the entire higher education sector under the international diffusion of ideas like standardisation, outcome-based education and consequential accountability movements. While universities favourably accept the importance of change at the local level, this has not resulted in widespread change, in classroom practice (D'Andrea and Gosling 2005; Nelson and Robinson 2006). The issue of reform is tending more towards organisational restructuring rather than salient features of instruction, following similar patterns of reform in other jurisdictions.

Quality assurance has emerged as a management tool to prevent quality problems that have been most immediate and pressing to higher education, and this has impacted upon the higher education system of every continent (Ewell 2010; Harvey and Newton 2007). However, it is not evident whether current quality assurance initiatives have created a more conducive and supportive higher education sector as there is disagreement over their motivation, value and implications (Amaral and Magalhaes 2004; Mhlanga 2008; Skolnik 2010; Westerheijden et al. 2007). For example, there exists a motivational paradox between assessment for quality assurance and assessment for quality improvement, and this represents conflicting interest and a divergent focus (Borden 2010). Furthermore, quality assurance relates to 'broader organisational change processes than those more specifically related to teaching and learning' (Stensaker 2008: 10). Moreover, evidence of its effect on student learning remains obscure internationally (Filippakou and Tapper 2008; Hodson and Thomas 2003; Kristensen 2010; Taousanidis and Antoniadou 2010).

Quality assurance received warm acceptance by enthusiastic policy makers and education bureaucrats due to its attractiveness to governments with increasing interests in accountability (Stensaker 2008). However, it has been strongly resisted by academics and students who have experienced alienation under its influence as less concern for their perspectives is shown (Anderson 2006; Gvaramadze 2008; Harvey 2005; Rosa et al. 2012) with empirical evidence suggesting the political non-neutrality of quality assurance (Skolnik 2010; Westerheijden 2007). Furthermore, supporting evidence emerged from Africa that criticised the political fuzziness of assurance (Khelfaoui 2009), and its ramifications for higher education institutions operational procedures and academic practices (Mhlanga 2008; Shawa 2008).

While there have been a number of criticisms of the quality assurance approaches in higher education, internationally (see Law 2010: 362-363 for a summary), its essence remains at the core of ongoing attention to accountability of institutions of higher education. For the Western nations, this has often been interpreted as a concern to maintain economic dominance through the pursuit of high calibre working forces (Westerheijden 2007). However, developing countries have sought this through the intervention of international forces such as the World Bank. These forces are targeted on the importation of policies, which mirror the higher education system of Western countries (Collins and Rhoads 2008; Lim 2001).

Quality Assurance in African Higher Education Context

Today, quality assurance is becoming an integral part of Africa's higher education systems as governments, in some parts of Africa, have shown their concerns and commitment to its establishment and operation (Hayward 2010; Materu 2007). The adoption of quality assurance in Africa seems a replication of the 'Bologna Process' (Khelfaoui 2009; Mhlanga 2008; Shawa 2008), reflecting 'symbolic adaptation' (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004) or a metaphor of 'policy borrowing' or 'transfer' in education (Phillips 2005; Turbin 2001). For example, the conceptual understanding of quality as 'fitness for purpose' is similar almost everywhere. There are shared similarities in objectives, approaches to quality assurance procedures, how the different data collection tools are employed, and the nature of the outcomes (Materu 2007).

However, there are distinct features added to the adopted quality assurance scheme. For example, South Africa uses 'fitness for transformational purpose' type of conceptualisation (Luckett 2005), which is the result of integrating quality assurance with the country's dire need to influence economic and social transformation. A further paradigm shift is underway in South Africa to establish a culture of collecting national evidence of quality through a promising area of emphasis: student engagement (Matthew et al. 2012; Strydom et al. 2012). Elsewhere, in Nigeria and Ethiopia, a national university ranking process, as one of their yearly activities, was incorporated into their higher education system's core business (Materu 2007; Tadesse et al. 2012). This ranking exercise seems a positive influence when it is seen at the surface. However, as the concern of those higher education institutions' leaders has increased, its long-term detrimental impact upon the higher education quality culture becomes real, internationally (Bookstein et al. 2010; Harvey 2008; Marginson and van der Wende 2006; Tambi et al. 2008; Usher and Savino 2007).

Other differences are the result of the socio-political circumstances prevalent in the various parts of Africa. For example, the lack of facilities

and outmoded curricula are prominent quality issues in African universities, and a further imbalance between core values of higher education and the profound influence of managerialism (Ntshoe 2004; Teferre and Altbach 2003). Research shows that the quality assurance systems in Africa are operating in a hostile environment where governments are insisting on increased access and demanding quality outputs while, at the same time, interfering in university governance (Hayward 2006). **Under these circumstances, it is difficult to maintain autonomy,** regarded as essential for creativity and learning (Materu 2007; Mhlanga 2008). This untenable situation has led to uncertainty about how to accommodate these pressures without compromising the academic purposes of higher education institutions' (Khelfaoui 2009; Strydom and Strydom 2004) and to further implementation constraints (Shawa 2008).

The Ethiopian Higher Education Context

In Ethiopia, there is a rapid expansion of the higher education system since the mid-1990s. This expansion entails increasing access to higher education and a widening of participants through extension, summer, and private programmes (Yizengaw 2007). Expansion fuelled the proliferation of new regional universities to counterbalance the centralisation of higher education institutions around the capital, Addis Ababa (Goastellec 2008). In the 2011/12 academic year, the higher education sector hosted a total of 494,110 students in the regular and continuing and distance programmes, both in government and non-government institutions (Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Education 2012). While the proportion of women students accounted for 28.2 percent of the total student enrolment, the private sector accommodated for 37.1 percent of same. Despite these rapid expansions, Ethiopia's Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) is 5.2 percent. This appears huge for the country compared to institutional capabilities, yet it is still minimal compared with the 7 percent Gross Enrolment Rate within the continent of Africa, and a 26 percent average rate worldwide (UNESCO 2009). Thus, to level with these, Ethiopia needs to increase the extent of expansion within the country, at the same time, improving the quality of the higher education system.

In Ethiopia, the role of higher education as a backbone of the country's development effort to eradicate poverty is given a central position and part of the vision is concerned with improving the quality and employability of university graduates (Federal Ministry of Education 2010). It is definitely true that quality assurance is important for achieving the development goal of the higher education system, thereby contributing to the attainment of the country's central agenda (Ashcroft 2004).

The History of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Ethiopia

One of the most important reforms that offers a legal basis for the rapid expansion of the higher education, and the establishment of a quality assurance system in the country is the proclamation number 351/2003 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2003). Following this proclamation, a national agency was established in 2003. A couple of pilot external quality assessments were conducted in one private college and one governmental university, in the 2005 academic year. Later on, a large-scale quality audit was conducted in the then relatively older nine government universities. As well, the higher education proclamation number 650/2009 has given directions to the higher education sector in the country by formulating improved policy and mandating structural changes (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2009).

Following the establishment of a national higher education relevance and quality agency, much has been said about the need to create a culture of evidence in the Ethiopian higher education institutions from which would flow better data and greater institutional accountability. While the Ethiopian public universities, responding to the national agency's calls, have begun such development those assessment efforts to date have mostly been transactional and have brought little systemic change. Due to this and other problems, there are emerging research reports that justify the challenges of exercising quality assurance (Ashcroft and Rayner 2010; Ashcroft and Rayner 2011; Nega 2012; Semela 2011; Teshome and Kebede 2010). Regardless of these, the existing reality in the higher education institutions is complicated by problems of resourcing and a shortage of realistic quality parameters (Tadesse et al. 2012; Zerihun 2006). Research reveals existing deficits in relation to these complications and proposes strong recommendations to change (Asefa 2008; Cantrell 2010; Nega 2012; Zerihun et al. 2012), but so far there is no supporting evidence about the actualisation of such recommendations being implemented.

This study was designed to examine whether the process and contents of quality assurance constitute a substantial means by which Ethiopian higher learning institutions improve the quality of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the study was intended to outline the consequences of quality assurance; and explore its associated factors. While addressing these, the study offers a distinct and different perspective on evaluation, and this can yield important insights for researchers and practitioners of higher education concerning the relationship between quality assurance and improvement. An in-depth study of the selected case (quality assurance policy) provides administrators, teachers, students, and policy makers with some information that will help them to understand the quality assurance policy initiative from a broader perspective and judge the merit or worth of this initiative in the light of quality improve-

ment. While the emphasis is on the Ethiopian higher education context, this study may make an important contribution for those practitioners and decision makers working in other cultural contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This article employs a case study method, particularly *evaluative case study* that represents the incorporation of critical (emancipatory) paradigm and reflective judgement into the evaluation process (Melrose 1998). While ‘the case itself is regarded as sufficient interest to merit investigation’ (Stenhouse 1988: 49), the policy domains are considered central issues of concern. The study illustrates how an evaluative case study might have helped to conduct evaluation, reaching beyond immediate concerns of traditionally understood rational functionalist tradition that focuses on immediate implications and privileges a managerial dimension (Melrose 1998). Such an evaluation does bring into focus fundamental questions relating to quality assurance leading to a more meaningful evaluation that, in the end, provides more significant and useful findings.

Data Sources

In this study, the case to be evaluated is the quality assurance policy of the Ethiopian higher education system expressed in two institutions: the national higher education relevance and quality agency and one public university. While most of the evidence have been generated from the electronic copies of quality assurance policies, this was supported by additional information obtained through the researcher experience working in the Ethiopian higher education system, and informal conversations made with some students and teachers working in one public university in Ethiopia during the 2011-12 academic year. Thus, by its nature, the study is neither purely empirical nor purely interpretive (Creswell 1998). These are important characteristics to warrant the version of case study considered here to be both theoretically justifiable and practically desirable as well (Stenhouse 1988).

Conceptual Definitions

This article adapted D’Andrea’s (2007) interpretations of the macro and micro levels. Accordingly, the macro level refers to national/institutional higher education policies that affect tertiary institutions. The micro level, or individual level, refers to the local practice at the smallest level of the organisational unit of the higher education community in relation to the teaching/learning processes, including curriculum planning, the interaction between the teachers and students, among other things.

The concepts ‘boon’ and ‘bandwagon effect’ need explicit descriptions of their meanings as intended in this article. This article conceptualises boon as possible benefit sought from quality assurance pertaining to the higher education system operations. However, advantage may be relative, so this study considers the possible positive influences it has brought in assumptions, beliefs and practices. Thus, benefits include success stories and improved situations as a result of engagement in quality assurance. The concept of bandwagon effect represents a group thinking process grounded in a social dynamic to reveal a tendency to follow the actions or beliefs of others (Colman 2003). The concept of bandwagon effect equates to the essence of policy borrowing and policy transfer in education (Phillips and Ochs 2003), as well as, external rationalisation (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004).

Conceptual Framework of Analysis and Interpretations

In this study, quality assurance is approached as a policy domain, reviewing policies that are formulated and implemented in Ethiopian higher education. To further understand the nature of quality assurance, the researcher incorporated, into the critical analysis, a quality assurance analysis framework (Perellon 2007) and a conceptual lens of bandwagon effect (Colman 2003). The analysis and interpretations of quality assurance, in this form, would help to identify areas that should be maintained, and what improvements would help to maximise benefits and find better ways to alleviate problems. This helps to establish a solution-focused approach to quality problems instead of focusing on retrospective problem diagnosis (Brown 1992). Moreover, it provides alternative vantage points from which to evaluate the potency of quality assurance to promote the improvement of quality.

The interpretivist nature of the study means that the researcher is bound up in the studied higher education setting, rather than being a detached, objective observer. The data from the analysis of quality assurance policy were instrumental in the establishment of the discussion topics or questions, as presented in this article. Through the analytic process, the perspective of the researcher is balanced with the domain analysis, lived experiences, and literature – so that the truth is more likely to emerge when all these perspectives are synthesised. Indeed, this proved important in ensuring that the assumptions made were not solely the result of the researcher’s subjective interpretation, but also grounded by actual data and a review of relevant literature.

This study used Perellon’s (2007) quality assurance framework to chart the essential elements of quality assurance policy. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Perellon’s framework is domain analysis based on substantive contents across five dimensions. These dimensions include objective,

control, focus areas, procedures, and use. Perellon's framework was found appropriate for this study since this provides a platform to critically analyse quality assurance as this assists in the exploration of the processes involved in 'cross-national attraction' and its likely consequences (Philips & Ochs 2003). Perellon's (2007) five dimensions are defined as the following:

- *Objectives* refer to the intended targets of quality assurance representing desired outcomes,
- *Control* refers to the authorised people in the higher education community who are responsible for monitoring the process of quality assurance,
- *Areas* denote the major components involved in the quality assurance practices,
- *Procedures* imply the setup of the quality assurance arrangements.
- *Uses* refer to the scope of utilising the information collected or data sources.

The policy development process, as Darling-Hammond elaborated in her article 'Policy and Change: Getting beyond Bureaucracy', is evolutionary, and it extends through 'the basic ways in which policy is conceived, developed and put into practice' (Darling-Hammond 2005: 362). Cognizant of this fact, this study focused on specific issues of quality assurance, including the process, contents, consequences and associated factors.

Critical Policy Analysis and Evaluation

The Ethiopian Higher Education Quality Assurance Policy

This study approaches quality assurance as a policy domain. Here the adopted national quality assurance policy of Ethiopia (Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency 2006a; Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency 2006b; Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency 2006c), and the corresponding policy of one of the universities (Jimma University 2011a) are presented using Perellon's (2007) five dimensions.

The National Quality Assurance Policy of Ethiopia

Objectives

The agency's espoused mission is 'to ensure a high quality and relevant higher education system in Ethiopia.' *Its* operational objectives include:

- Assessing the relevance and quality of higher education;
- Ensuring that the curriculum supports the country's development needs;
- Providing an efficient and transparent accreditation system; and
- Disseminating information regarding standards and programmes.

Control

In Ethiopia, quality assurance is operated by a national quality assurance agency. In the document, exploring this dimension, higher education institutions are the owners with the national quality assurance agency being mandated to work independently.

Areas

Major components: Accreditation, audit, and curriculum harmonisation.

Main activities include developing quality assurance guidelines and procedures, and promoting stakeholders awareness and participation.

Focus areas: There are 10 focus areas for internal and external quality assurance.

1. Vision, Mission and Educational Goals
2. Governance and Management System
3. Infrastructure and Learning Resources
4. Academic and Support Staff
5. Student Admission and Support Services
6. Programme Relevance and Curriculum
7. Teaching, Learning and Assessment
8. Student Progression and Graduate Outcomes
9. Research and Outreach Activities
10. Internal Quality Assurance

Procedures

Three-step procedures, including institutional self-evaluation, external audit, and peer-evaluation are the norms. There are also, quantitative performance indicators and scoring procedures.

Uses

Predominantly used for reporting strengths and weaknesses of the institutions and accountability to ministers. The institutions are autonomous in deciding whether to disseminate findings to the public or not.

The Quality Assurance Policy of a University in Ethiopia

Objectives

Although it was not directly written under the title of objectives, there are descriptions of statements typifying the purposes of quality assurance scheme institutionally. The statements are to:

- Ensure periodic discussion of the processes of teaching, learning and assessment.
- Provide orientation on remedial programmes.
- Facilitate discussion with students and academic staff on matters related to academic remedial programme.
- Assist in departments/colleges and other academic bodies in the development of standards.
- Assist in establishing central examination data base. Sample exam for each course will be collected at the end of each semester.
- Oversee the functioning of examination committee and team charters' activities at the department level.
- Assist in developing policies and instruments for quality assurance of academic programmes.

Control

Though they are still under establishment, at the institution level, there are quality assurance office structures across the different colleges and these offices are mandated to monitor and assure quality with a centrally coordinating office of Academic Programme and Quality Assurance (APQA).

Areas

There are three main areas of concern for the internal quality assurance policy:

- a. Academic remedial actions for undergraduate students who scored less than 55 percent of a set of continuous assessment activities.
- b. Affirmative action tutorial programme for female students.
- c. Academic remedial actions based on Department/School recommendation.

The main activities include the following:

- Developing quality assurance guidelines and procedures,
- Promoting stakeholders awareness and participation,

- Actively involving in university and college level internal and external quality assessment/audit activities,
- Assisting in the development and review of examination policies and ensure their proper implementation, and
- Proposing the improvement plan based on quality assessment results.

Procedures

There are three-step procedures, beginning with Department-level review of performance, followed by College-level review, and finally, institutional review. There are also quantitative performance indicators and scoring procedures.

Uses

At the institution level, there is reporting of reviews and reports to the department heads, college deans and to the central APQA office, when applicable. The review reports are also used for further planning for improvement.

Critical Issues of Quality Assurance

While globalisation is the prime impetus for borrowing quality assurance policies and practices between countries, the major problem lies on the background theory, and the emphasis placed on structural and institutional factors (Law 2010). Although the underlying theory has not been explicitly stated, the notion of quality assurance relates to the theory of the learning organisation, which addresses the macro level of analysis and sees change as a function of policy mandating and corresponding changes in organisational routines, values and practices.

The reviewed quality assurance policy of the Ethiopian higher education has elements that boasts technical soundness to fairly execute quality assurance functions. The first is that emphasis on quality assurance helped Ethiopian higher education institutions to become more concerned with external requirements, and this potentially provides initial impetus to start discussing issues of quality. This has had a profound influence on the way in which the entire higher education sector has invested their resources to shape up the direction of their quality focus. This has been supported in the literature as quality assurance exercise given its initial positive outcome in the development of quality culture (Harvey and Stensaker 2008; Trowler 2005).

Yet, there are still some blurred areas both nationally and institutionally that need further clarity when seen from the perspective of quality improvement. For example, aspects of the assurance purposes focus on areas and standards. As presented in the previous section, the agency's stated objectives are a

means, not ends. While the end is to bring lasting change, for example, in the quality of the graduates' competencies, 'assessing quality' and 'disseminating information' represent the means. Guided by this, a university also mistakes the means for an end, as it is dealing with, for example, 'ensuring the existence of discussions and reviews' rather than targeting 'its effects'.

Moreover, Ethiopian quality assurance also applies measures of teaching inputs such as 'infrastructure, learning resources, and academic and support staff,' as indicators of quality. This is educationally inappropriate as it lacks paying attention to the actual achievement of students resulting from these teaching inputs (Maher 2004). **The same policy document states student progression and graduation outcomes as indicators of student achievement.** In practice, these are performance indicators (Kis 2005) and tell very little about the learning experiences and students success rates (Coates 2005; Pascarella 2001). Thus, a more realistic and genuine measure of the value of higher education than a measure of teaching input and institutional performance is highly desirable.

Furthermore, the standards seem blurred. Green (1994) states: 'Standard is a basis for measurement, or a yardstick – a neutral term to describe a required characteristic of a product or service' (p.13). In the sense of quality assurance, it means that the standard should be the norms, expectations and specifications adopted (Harvey and Newton 2004). **From this view, the current descriptions of the ten focus areas are merely *labels* described as a list of areas for evaluation.** Likewise, there is no specific description about standards in the quality assurance policy of the studied institution. To endow these with substance, the standards should outline the generic principles that should be in place rather than just specifying the focus areas. Thus, new standards need to be prepared with clear descriptions of specific items such as standards of competence, service standards, and organisational standards. In this regard, the government, as *owner*, has stipulated the structure and principles of expected standards for the higher education (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2009). The Ethiopian higher education strategic centre has given detailed descriptions of the graduate competencies (Higher Education Strategy Centre 2012). However, the government has consistently broken the principles when it comes to expansion (Ashcroft and Rayner 2011). There is a critical need for the agency to strongly work towards ensuring the fulfilment of minimum thresholds at every higher education institution, and institutional assurance bodies need to do the same in every college.

The other critical point is the national agency's operations as well as the location of quality assurance organs institutionally. Nationally, the assignment of the agency's executive has been made on the basis of bureaucratic rationality

rather than professional authority, thus quality is controlled by a government appointed agency, thereby ensuring that the body lacks independence. This is similar to the situation in other African countries (Materu 2007). Likewise, the assumed position of the quality assurance body within a university does not empower those working in quality assurance and quality care to be independent as budget and operations are dependent on the decisions of high ranking officials, with activities and decisions being subject to the serious scrutiny of this order. This creates favourable conditions for powerful influence of managerial rationality (Barnett 2003). This arrangement compromises their potential influence for safeguarding quality.

Factors Leading to Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education System

In the Ethiopian higher education system, the adoption of quality assurance and the decision to establish the national quality assurance agency, and similar institution-based quality assurance bodies occurred under the influence of several forces, both internal, that is, from the higher education institutions, and from unforeseen external influences as well. One of the internal influences was the long-held tradition of a nominal quality assessment practice routinely exercised for the purpose of fairly fulfilling accountability requirements and staff promotion. These evaluative processes were, however, powerless to influence improvement and innovativeness (Zerihun et al. 2012).

Another problem was the higher education institutions failure to acknowledge individual and bottom-up quality improvement initiatives, and inability to make use of research results, and the need to exercise institutional autonomy on academic matters (Bekele et al. 2010; Jimma University 2008). The other important influence in creating a bottleneck is the government's excessive interest in accountability and its centralised control and top-down, linear adoption model (Areaya 2010).

Moreover, the quality assurance process was conducted at the same time as the entire higher education landscape was being re-structured through a process termed 'Business Process Re-engineering' (BPR). This poor timing meant that there was much uncertainty in the system with restructuring taking precedence over quality assurance. On top of this, the donors who granted funding and foreign advisors were also influential in determining how events played out (Ashcroft and Rayner 2010). These external push factors are more indirect. The main sources of external influence were the following:

- The World Bank, which used to offer advice and low-cost funding,

- The United Kingdom, through assigning experienced academics to assist in the national quality assurance agency, and
- The Netherlands funding projects that were mainly run through Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Moreover, issues of quality are not dealt with impartially as they are under the influences of different stakeholders and this has created external ownership leading to compliance, but with some achievements and consequences.

What Does Quality Assurance Bring to Ethiopian Higher Education?

The Boon of Quality Assurance

In the Ethiopian higher education, current efforts via quality assurance have offered some benefits in terms of initiating the test for quality via creating awareness on the need to establish quality assurance, and increasing the use of quality assessment structures and processes. Moreover, the establishment of a national quality assurance agency was followed by a series of developments, including programme specifications (with a focus on graduate profiles and mechanisms of quality assurance), and institutional self-evaluation, and external quality audit. Likewise, there were trial collaborative projects to establish a qualification framework for higher education with the help of experts from South African Universities. Also, there has been an increased attention to subject benchmarking at the national level that is followed by a number of consultative workshops to raise awareness and share experiences.

The other benefits are generated from the national quality assurance agency's continual effort to provide training support and wider disseminations of the external quality audit experiences and updating current developments via the national agency newsletters. These are good sources of enrichment (Teshome and Kebede 2010). It is critically important to think of other constructs that may provide more fertile sources of supplementation to these efforts.

Within the universities, there are some emerging developments in terms of preparing and using academic quality assurance guidelines. The concerned APQA office has given special attention to some relevant quality assurance themes, for example, remedial actions for academically low performing students, affirmative action for female students, and remedial action based on Department/School special recommendation.

The Bandwagon Effects of Quality Assurance

Inaccurate Focus

There are foreseeable undesirable outcomes from a quality assurance initiative. However, it is too strong to say that outcomes have been the results of only quality assurance, since other compounding factors such as rapid expansion, similar reform initiatives, and the lack of baseline data have exacerbated situations. One of the major consequences of quality assurance was the development of policies and guidelines that are more concerned with regulations and steering of procedures instead of real concerns for learning and change. Also structural organisational changes are apparent. These outcomes are evident in other higher education systems as well (Mhlanga 2008; Westerheijden 2007), implying that quality assurance, in effect, is meant for broader organisational change and accountability mechanisms (Ewell 2009; Harvey 2005; Stensaker 2008).

A cursory look into the adoption process and the duplication of orientations and actions in the quality assurance exercises lead to the assertion that a culture of conformity and adherence to the national reform policies and guidelines is growing in Ethiopian higher education. Also apparent is a shift in focus with the mobilising of resources to fit with external requirements, for example, recent efforts to conduct the tracer study and join the modularisation model (Higher Education Strategy Centre 2012; Jimma University 2011b).

Moreover, there is a changed role for academic developers now consumed by quality assessment and assurance requirements rather than a real commitment to quality care as they engage with their routine activities (Tadesse et al. 2012). This outcome was one of the fears expressed by Cantrell (2010) and has unfortunately become realised. Thus the pursuit of quality assurance has led to inefficient practices and distracted the institution's attention away from more essential activities.

Changed Assumptions and Beliefs

It seems that a new belief system acknowledging the centrality of student satisfaction as opposed to student's productivity has come into play. Also scepticism is apparent as the academic staff members have complained extensively about over prescriptive teaching and assessment policies and managerial control over their class attendance, particularly at the beginning of a semester. Currently, there is increasing pressure to embark on achieving modularisation and Balanced Score Card (BSC) as part of the neo-liberal accountability agenda (Higher Education Strategy Centre 2012). There is a tendency of switching from teaching students to delivering modules (Hussey and Smith 2010). While the advantages of BSC model over traditional forms

of performance measuring tools and its institutional implications are very clear (Kassahun 2011), this contributes more as government regulation and steering tool (Harvey and Newton 2007), mainly used to promote bureaucratisation as opposed to quality improvement (Barnett 2003).

In spite of these facts, the new initiatives have created further burdens for Ethiopian university academics. In response to the changed culture, the academic staff members are complaining that their lives are now governed by a quality audit culture rather than one based on trust and respect. This audit culture has potential negative implications for the future of the academic profession, with the possibility that the decline in quality teaching and learning will intensify.

Can Assurance Helps Quality Improvement?

Quality assurance, as it is currently interpreted in the Ethiopian higher education context, is much focused on the structural and institutional factors rather than the educational practices and student learning experiences. As a result, the information provided by a quality assurance approach is primarily useful to measure higher education institution and system progress, but of more limited utility for instructional guidance. It is argued here that quality assurance is a relatively weak intervention to ameliorate the quality because, while it reveals shortcomings, it does not contain the guidance and expertise to inform responses.

Regardless of this, there are persuasive arguments in favour of quality assurance as it promotes both accountability and improvement, at the same time (Teshome and Kebede 2010), and this has impacted the entire higher education system. Scholars argue that, rather than being directed at the essential elements of quality improvement, and to the pressing academic and practical problems, quality assurance places much emphasis on how the quality assurance is to be accomplished (Harvey and Williams 2010; Huisman and Westerheijden 2010; Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004). This is so because quality assurance, seen from its adoption process in Ethiopia, appears to be based on transfer theory of learning, which does not recognise the complexity and contextual nature of educational change (Squire et al. 2003).

Also, the Ethiopian higher education context is not the same as that found in Europe or elsewhere (Goastellec 2008). **Conditions for Ethiopian academics** are likely to be more burdensome (Assefa 2008; Nega 2012; Tadesse et al. 2012; Teferri and Altbach 2003). However, there has been remarkably little discussion of appropriate strategies for shifting thinking and practices at the micro or individual level. In short, by imposing criteria and looking for evidence of conformance to processes and procedures, as the Ethiopian higher

education system is aggressively pursuing, the illness in higher education academe related to improving and sustaining quality teaching and learning is being effectively ignored.

Moreover, quality problems can be partly caused by the values and assumptions that underpin different aspects of pedagogy and assessment (Haggis 2006; Hayward 2010). Indeed, a rigorous study to understand the different factors influencing the realities for academics and students is desperately needed. More importantly, there is a need for proper quality measurement that is valid, contextualised, and closely linked to an improvement plan and execution (Harvey 2005) because improvement requires moving forward through action (Rosa et al. 2012).

However, in the current form, the institutions are distracted from the real work of quality improvement by the emerging domestic annual ranking of universities, which is the quality assurance showcase of the Ethiopian higher education system, positively deceiving institutions into thinking that they are performing well. Seen critically, this may be risky as it may contribute to many institutions of the country becoming complacent, leading to a resumption of the business-as-usual mindset. Moreover, the emerging national ranking of universities seems a futile exercise as it has been complicated with the use of quantitative indicators, institutional annual reporting at times of heightened accountability and a major weakness in measuring what matters most for the students learning. Of course, measuring quality is not as simple as *bean counting*, and it is not also a matter of *counting everything*, as quality is more complex and some variables are more powerful in influencing students learning than others (Coates 2005; Kuh et al. 2006; Tam 2007). This hierarchy needs to be recognised and acted upon.

According to Yorke's (1998) recommendations, a higher education system can be treated as a complex set of levels, with the macro levels (e.g. the institution or programme) being more responsible for the accountability aspects of educational quality, and the micro levels (e.g. individual) more responsible for the enhancement aspects (Yorke 1998). As we move from the macro levels towards the micro, the quality indicators of importance change significantly, and become more related to the individual. In this multi-level system, quality indicator data should be evaluated and acted on at the lowest level possible, and higher levels are expected to audit whether the data have been obtained and acted on properly. By way of establishing such a multi-level quality system, and strengthening the relationships between them, it is possible to maintain the validity of evidence, prevent methodological flaws, and assist in proper planning and execution of evidence-based quality improvement (Trowler et al. 2005).

Implications

First, there needs to be better and more explicit thinking about the points, values, and levels at which the quality assurance policies and their implementation strategies are being addressed, and the gaps in policies and strategies oriented to the micro level in particular need to be worked out. Second, the theories of change which underpin the quality assurance policies directed at enhancing teaching and learning in higher education need to be made explicit. An appropriate theoretical approach might be social practice theory (Engstrom and Danielson 2006; Wenger 1998). By virtue of establishing the basis of quality assurance with a social practice theory of change, it is possible to address the micro level, at the same time, accommodating the different dimensions of change such as the social, affective, psychological and cognitive aspects (Trowler et al. 2005).

As a result of engagement in a quality improvement process associated with major tasks, participants will be involved in the social construction of reality, at least in the areas of commonly shared practices that they have. It is through this process that initiatives for the enhancement of teaching and learning will, then, be switched from a focus on the structural and institutional factors to the practical and sociocultural domains. A deeper improvement of quality is a long-term affair that requires a willingness of everyone in the institution to change to a culture of quality, which is improvement-led, research informed, and evidence based. Matru (2007: 123) expresses this point perfectly when he said, 'institutions are owners of quality and a culture of quality is most relevant'.

However, initiatives require the delegation of responsibility for quality and standards down to the individual level where innovation, responsiveness and trust can play out (Sahlberg and Hargreaves 2011). This is the main challenge for those working on quality assurance to expand and further their roles. On balance, it needs to pay special attention on proper diagnosis, empowerment, and building a culture of cooperation.

Conclusion

This study has discussed quality assurance in higher education from a broader perspective and presented a policy analysis and reflective review of quality assurance in the Ethiopian higher education context. The main purpose here is to examine some of the central benefits and drawbacks of adopting this approach in the light of quality improvement. It is argued here that there are three fundamental problems underlying the quality assurance towards enhancing teaching and learning in the Ethiopian higher education system. First, the initiatives are underpinned by a policy mandate and an inadequate tacit theory

of change. Second, although the initiatives are supposed to address different levels of analysis in the higher education system, they do so in a partial and fractured way, compounded by methodological, empirical, and measurement weaknesses. For example, quality assurance policies both at the national and institution levels focus on input, quality assurance processes, and institutional performance. Third, these initiatives were influenced by a number of forces (internal & external) that exist in a situation indicative of inconsistencies (Trowler et al. 2005). These may undermine their effects. In short, there are indications that the initiatives lack a *holistic thinking* to effect deeper improvement; it reflects a possibility of hopping on a quality assurance bandwagon, not based on its merits, but based on what others do.

This study argues that the issues of quality assurance that have received so much attention over the years with regard to teaching and learning are unsound in precisely addressing the forces limiting the effectiveness of the higher education sector. This is mainly because the notion that a precise instrument for measuring what we are doing educationally is the answer to a failing system is surely simplistic and erroneous (Sahlberg 2007). The result is that wherever poor outcomes exist, they have been hidden by the excessive concentration on processes of accountability and self-assessment, and by a complacency that arises because good processes are easier to achieve than good outcomes (Mahsood 2012). Rather, due recognition of the complex nature of teaching and learning and a profound understanding of how students learn is required, if progress is to be made in raising standards and quality in the higher education sector. Thus, authorising quality assurance alone will not influence the changes that are necessary to make a qualitative difference to the Higher Education experience in Ethiopia. The current outstanding effort by South African higher education system that is shifting focus to student engagement is exemplary in contextualising issues of quality closer to the pedagogic practices, and the students learning experiences (Strydom et al. 2012).

Of course, there is a serious quality problem in the Ethiopian higher education academe. What the higher education sector most urgently needs, however, is painstaking attention to its real deficiencies. Getting on the quality assurance bandwagon is merely imitative of a Western solution based on external rationalisation (Khelifaoui 2009; Obasi and Olutayo 2011). Although the arguments presented in this article are partly theoretical, the conclusion can also yield an empirical hypothesis, amenable to practical investigation.

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