

## ***Assessing Institutional Self-Assessment in Ethiopian Higher Learning Institutions***

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### **Abstract**

*Institutional self-assessment is a proactive action, which is merely meant for improvement. The fact that different institutions employ different approaches of institutional self-assessment depends on its institutional structure, institutional goal, institutional philosophy and the kinds of educational outcomes they would like their students to acquire.*

*This study aims to assess the existing experience of institutional self-assessment in private higher learning institutions in Ethiopia. It will examine the trend and approaches the institution employ to conduct their own institutional self-assessment.*

*In order to assess the practice of private higher learning institutions with regard to their institutional self-assessment practice, the study administers a questionnaire among ten private colleges and university colleges in Ethiopia. The study also tries to analyze the existing institutional self-assessment documents of the institutions. The findings of this study will assist policy makers in developing a standardized approach of institutional self-assessment.*

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### **Introduction**

The issue of quality assessment has been high on the agenda of high education institutions in Ethiopia for some time. The issue has become the concern amongst stakeholders as the number of higher learning institutions increases dramatically.

Currently, according to official statistics obtained from the Ministry of Education (MoE) the number of registered private higher education institutions is estimated to be more than 150.

Quality education can be seen as a set of elements that constitute the input, process and output of the education system. Accordingly, there are certain factors that impose the need for quality in education systems and standards in the sector, these include:

- Accountability
- Greater expectations of students/customers, and perhaps
- Significant increase in student population.

Of course, quality assessment in any institution should be conducted on a regular basis and the institution should make use of the information obtained from the assessment. Trudy Bers substantiates this idea: “you don’t fatten a pig by weighing it.” This implies that you do not improve education by measuring it unless you make use of those measurements. In other words, it is what the higher education institution does with the information obtained from the measurement that matters most.

In this regard, assessment either confirms current practice or signals change. In other words, the assessment informs the institution how healthy it is; accordingly the institution needs to react towards improving the aspects that need improvement. Assessment is an interactive process and the ultimate goal of assessment is, therefore, continuous improvement.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to assess the practice of quality assessment in private higher education institutions in Ethiopia, towards identifying good practices and problems thereby enabling them develop their own quality system. The aim is not to propose a standardized quality assessment model.

The study is therefore limited to identifying what private higher education institutions are doing in term of assessing the quality of education.

## **Methods**

This study is based on a designed survey (questionnaire) that was administered to 10 percent of the total private higher education institutions. Using the responses obtained through the survey, the study tries to examine the existence of a quality system, practice of institutional self-assessment, involvement of stakeholders, and the purposes of the institutional self-assessment in the PHEIs.

## **Institutional Self-Assessment: A Theoretical Overview**

Assessment is a well-planned, systematic and ongoing process that involves the gathering, interpretation, and application of information for continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

For Michael K. Smith and Jama L. Brandly assessment is “a means of gathering information that can be used in determining if an institution or program is accomplishing its mission.” In a similar way, Alexander Astin, in his one of the most frequently quoted books, Assessment for Excellence defines assessment as a process that includes the gathering of information concerning the functioning of the students, staff, and institutions of higher education. He further states, “the information may or may not be in numerical form, but the basic motive for gathering it is to improve the functioning of the institution and its people.

Functioning refers to the broad social purposes of a college or university: to facilitate student learning and development, to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and to contribute to the community and society.”

In his book Assessing Student Learning and Development, T. Dary Erwin says, “a test is a tool, whereas assessment is a process solving problems and answering questions.” Erwin further notes that “assessment is a systematic basis for making inferences about the learning and development of students.

More specifically, assessment is the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students' learning and development. It includes discussions about what should be assessed and how information will be used, just the hands on testing of students.”

## **The Purpose of Institutional Self-Assessment**

The purpose of institutional self-assessment may depend on the institutional mission and institutional program. However, in general, institutional self-assessment has two main goals: Improvement and accountability.

### **a) Improvement**

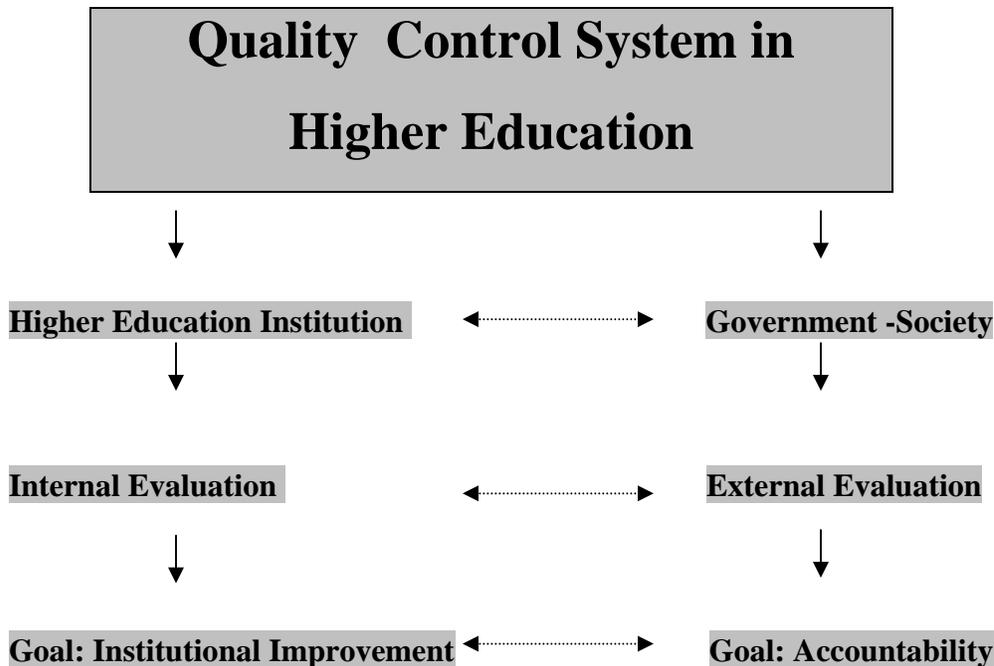
The ultimate goal of assessment is improvement. Institutional self-assessment that aims at improvement mainly emanates from within the institution. Higher Education is a process of transformation: input and output. If the institution is using the process to assess its performance, the underling concept is that quality is based on performance. In other words, quality is conceptualized as performance.

### **b) Accountability**

The Second purpose of institutional assessment is accountability. This implies that higher education institutions are mainly accountable to the government and to society as well.

Burke (2005) substantiates this idea as follows, “higher education intuitions, both private and public, are inevitably accountable to the government priorities, academic concerns, and market force.”

For a clear understanding of the purposes of institutional assessment in a higher education institution, consider the following model of a quality control system in higher education institutions.



Source: Dr. Laila E. Denoya (2006)

According to Dr. Laila E. Denoya, there are three major factors forcing Higher Education Institutions to develop integrated quality systems. These three factors are Government, Market and the Higher Education Institution itself.

### **Assessment in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions: A Historical Perspective**

Institutional self-assessment is a very recent phenomenon in the history of Ethiopian higher education. The Ethiopian Private Higher Education is no exception. Since its establishment, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) conducted a quality audit in four private and public institutions. The agency's first quality audit was in Debu University and St. Mary's University College in 2004/5. The second comprehensive quality audit conducted in Adama University and Unity University College in July 2006.

Thus, these institutions first assessed their institutional quality, then gave the reports of their self-assessment to the external assessors formed by HERQA. The external assessors audited the institutions based on the report.

In June 2006, the agency organized a workshop to discuss issues relating to institutional quality audits with stakeholders. According to HERQA's institutional audit procedure, the higher institution first conducts an institutional self-assessment and prepares a self evaluation document and, sends the document to HERQA expressing its wish to have an institutional quality audit.

One of HERQA'S institutional self assessment documents indicates the following ten points as major self assessment focus areas.

- 1) Vision, Mission and Educational Goal
- 2) Governance and Management System
- 3) Infrastructure and Learning Resource
- 4) Academic and Supports Staff
- 5) Student Admission and Support Service
- 6) Program Relevance and Curriculum
- 7) Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- 8) Student Progression and Graduate Outcomes
- 9) Research and Outreach Activities
- 10) Internal Quality Assurance

## **Results and Discussions**

A survey of teacher evaluation instruments was conducted in order to gather data regarding the practice of institutional self-assessment in private higher education institutions in Ethiopia. To this end, the institutional quality assessment questionnaire was administered in 15 private higher education institutions.

The questionnaire used at these institutions contained three parts. The first part specifically deals with general information regarding subject institutions. The second part deals with issues regarding institutional self assessment practice in the subject institutions. The third part specifically deals with aspects of self-assessment practice in the subject institutions. A total of 27 questions have been included in this questionnaire.

Institutional self-assessment documents of HERQA have also been examined. In the following section, the data gathered using the questionnaire will be presented along with the discussions.

### **Assessment of Institutional Self-Assessment**

The following table presents the characteristics of the institutions considered in the study.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the Institutions Considered in this Study**

<b>NO.</b>	<b>ITEM</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
<b>1</b>	<b><u>Type of program</u></b>	
	<b>TVET</b>	<b>100 %</b>
	<b>Diploma</b>	<b>50 %</b>
	<b>Degree</b>	<b>50 %</b>
	<b>Others</b>	<b>10 %</b>
<b>2</b>	<b><u>Modes of study</u></b>	
	<b>Regular</b>	<b>100 %</b>
	<b>Evening</b>	<b>100 %</b>
	<b>Distance</b>	<b>40 %</b>
<b>3</b>	<b><u>Years of operation</u></b>	
	<b>4 to 5 years</b>	<b>30 %</b>
	<b>10 to 15 years</b>	<b>60 %</b>
	<b>above 20 years</b>	<b>10 %</b>

As can be seen from the above table with regard to the type of programs the institutions offer, all of the institutions considered in this study offer TVET programs (i.e. 100% of the institutions), about 50% of the institution offer diploma programs, 50 % of the institutions offer degree programs and only 10 % of the institutions offer other programs including certificates and short term trainings.

Similarly, in terms of the modes of study, all of the institutions have regular and evening modes of study. While only 40% of the institutions have distance mode of study. The result shows that out of the total institutions considered in this study 40% of the institutions operated for 4-5 years, 60% of the institutions operated for 10 -15 years, and 10% of the institutions operated for more than 20 years.

### The existence of Quality Assessment (Assurance) Office in the institutions

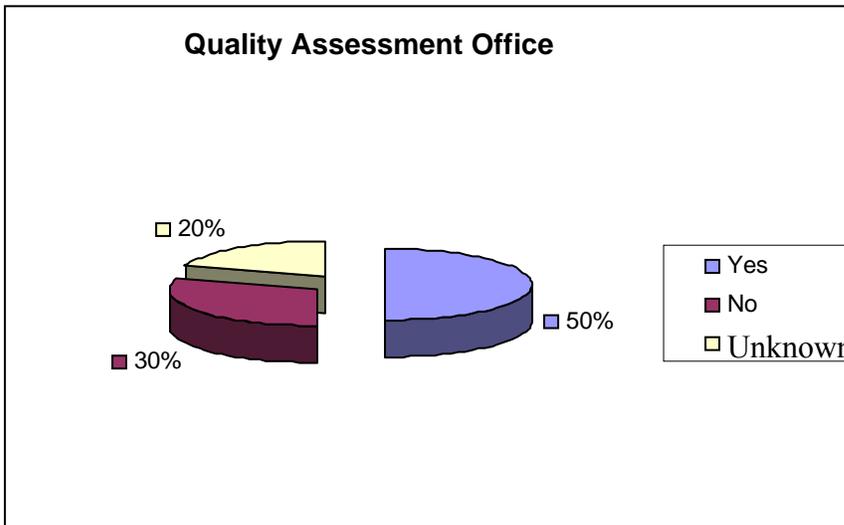


Figure 1: Quality Assessment Office

As indicated in figure 1, 50 % of the institutions have independent Quality Assessment (Assurance) Office, on the contrary 30 % of the institutions have no Quality Assessment (Assurance) Office, while it is unknown if there is in any Quality Assessment (Assurance) Office in 20% of the institutions. This implies that the majority of the institutions do not have a system of institutional quality assessment.

In other words, in terms of years of operations, 20 % of the total 30 % of the institutions that operated for 4 to 5 years have Quality Assessment (Assurance) Office. Only 50 % of the total 60 % of the institutions that operated for 10 to 15 years have Quality Assessment (Assurance) Office; however it is unknown whether the institutions that operated for 20 years and above have Quality Assessment (Assurance) Offices.

## Practice of Institutional Self-Assessment

Table 2: Regularity of Institutional Quality Assessment

Frequency Of Institutional Self-Assessment	Not Indicated	Quarterly	Annually	Difficult To Decide
Percent	10 %	20 %	20 %	50 %

Asked if how regularly or frequently they conduct Institutional Self-Assessment, 50 % of the respondents answered that it is difficult to decide, 20 % of the respondents said that they conduct annually, 20 % of the respondents answered quarterly and the remaining 10 % of the respondents did not indicate how regularly they conduct the assessment.

### Purpose of Institutional Self-Assessment

As it has been noted, the purpose of institutional assessment is mainly for institutional improvement. Besides, members of the institution feel ownership if the results of the assessment are used to **improve** their performance rather than evaluation or rate their performance. This can also be meant to identify the institution's strong aspects and areas for improvement. Institutional self assessment is also meant for accountability.

In this regard, the private higher education institutions in Ethiopia have lack of understanding of the purpose of institutional self assessment. The institutions were asked about the purposes of their institutional self assessment. 75 % of the institutions considered in this study conduct institutional self assessment for the purpose of accreditation, and only 10 % and 5 % of the institutions claim that the purpose of institutional self assessment is improvement and accountability respectively.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study is an attempt to assess the practice of institutional self assessment in private higher education institutions in Ethiopia. It is based on the data obtained from ten private higher education institutions.

As assessment is a well-planned, systematic and ongoing process that involves the gathering, interpretation, and application of information for continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

Fundamental notions of assessment have been discussed towards laying the ground for institutional assessment. Survey questionnaires were administered for ten institutions and analyzed to see the practice of institutional self-assessment within the institutions. Additional data have been obtained from documents of MoE and the institutional self-assessment documents of HERQA have also been examined.

Accordingly, the results of the investigation made on institutional assessment in private higher education institutions revealed that the majority of the institutions have no system of institutional assessment. In other words, majority of the institutions do not have a quality assessment office.

Absence of a system of institutional assessment leads to continuous assessment among the majority of the institutions. The results of the survey have also indicated that there is a tendency to misunderstand the aims of institutional quality assessment amongst the majority of the institutions.

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations have been made. Every Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) needs to establish a system of institutional quality assessment including a quality assessment office. The existence of a system of institutional assessment, however, does not bring institutional improvement unless it is used. In other words, PHEIs need to regularly conduct quality assessment for institutional improvement.

We cannot achieve the goal of institutional assessment simply by conducting institutional assessment on a regular basis unless we make use of the findings of our assessment. That is why Trudy Bers says “you don't fatten a pig by weighing it.” PHEIs need to conduct continuous institutional quality assessment and make use of the results towards institutional improvement.

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