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Research as an Imperative in a Quality Higher Education System

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Abstract

There is no doubt that research has been one of the key areas of engagement in higher education. However, literature indicates that research in higher education in East Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular is declining rather than growing. This paper highlights the link between quality education and the role of research in addressing the needs of stakeholders and some of the problems that causes staggering development of research in the region. The paper also examines how quality of the higher education is viewed by various stakeholders and how higher education institutions reconcile the needs of stakeholders. Following this, the second section of the study reviews briefly the research culture in East Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular and presents a brief summary of the result of HERQA external quality audit reports on research activities of 8 public higher education institutions. It also identifies some of the prominent problems, their causes and their resultant effects on the research culture of higher education institutions.

Introduction

Through teaching-learning, research, and outreach activities, higher education engages in the quest of academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry in all fields of human understanding. Higher education and research now are "essential components of culture, socio-economic and environmentally sustainable development of individuals, communities and nations" (Teshome, 2005:1). Research is the principal tool for creating new knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge through teaching. And collaboration in research tasks is the principal tool for developing academic and research staff through postgraduate study and training (Department of Education Pretoria, 1997). Ashcroft (2005) in this regard suggested that research is a 'key

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engine' for the development of a country's economy and, therefore, higher education institutions should give it a very important place in their curriculum.

There are, however, literatures indicating the declining trend of research in higher education in East Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular. This paper will, therefore, highlight the link between quality education, the role of research in addressing the needs of stakeholders and the roles of higher education institutions to negotiate between the needs of their stakeholders to translate them into goals and objectives which, in turn, will be achieved through the implementation of the three major activities of higher learning institutions: (i) teaching/ learning, (ii) research and (iii) outreach activities. It will also address some of the problems that have caused the poor development of research in East Africa and Ethiopia in particular.

The paper is organized in such a way that the first part of this paper sets out to examine how the quality of higher education is viewed by stakeholders and how higher education institutions reconcile the needs of stakeholders. The second section reviews briefly the research culture in East Africa and in Ethiopia in particular and presents brief summary of the result of HERQA external quality audit reports on research activities of 8 public higher education institutions. It also identifies some of the prominent problems and their effect on the research culture of higher education institutions in the region. Finally, the paper concludes with some remarks which are designed to help higher education institutions in their efforts to develop a research culture creating quality education.

Objectives the study
    The objectives of the paper are to:
- examine the link between quality education and research;

- identify some of the problems affecting the growth and development of research and research culture in the higher education institutions;
- offer some suggestions that would help for the growth and development of research as well as research culture in academic institutions' creating quality education.

Methodology

The study was done on the basis of a careful analysis of eight external quality audit reports in eight public universities published by HERQA in 2008. The information gained from relevant literature by known scholars in the area, and personal experience of the writers of the paper as quality auditors and higher education institution instructors were also employed.

What is Quality Education?

Many scholars define quality in education in many ways but there 'is much less agreement about what the term actually means in practice' (UNESCO, 2005). Most of them nevertheless agree on the fact that quality education can mean different things to different stakeholders. Green (1994), for instance, as quoted by the Inter-university Council for East Africa, (2007) says quality education is seen differently by different stakeholders. Here are some of the views of the stakeholders:

- **Accrediting organizations see *quality* as meeting threshold requirements.**

This quality concept often forms the basis for accreditation decisions. The problem is that it is not always clear what basic quality is. Setting threshold standards might also hinder innovations. Compliance with the threshold standards does not stimulate innovations.

- **Students see quality as added value.**

This concept emphasizes what happens to students. Education is about doing something to students. Quality means the value added to students during education and training. It is the method of formulating learning outcomes and realizing the outcomes in the graduates. The basic quality question is: "What has s/ he learnt?

- **Governments' view quality as value for money.**

This quality concept has its focus on efficiency. It measures outputs against inputs. It is often a concept supported by governments. The concept is connected with accountability.

- **Satisfaction of the client is another customer oriented view of quality.**

With the rise of the concept of the "student as a consumer", quality is described as: "something has quality when it meets the expectations of the consumer; quality is the satisfaction of the client".
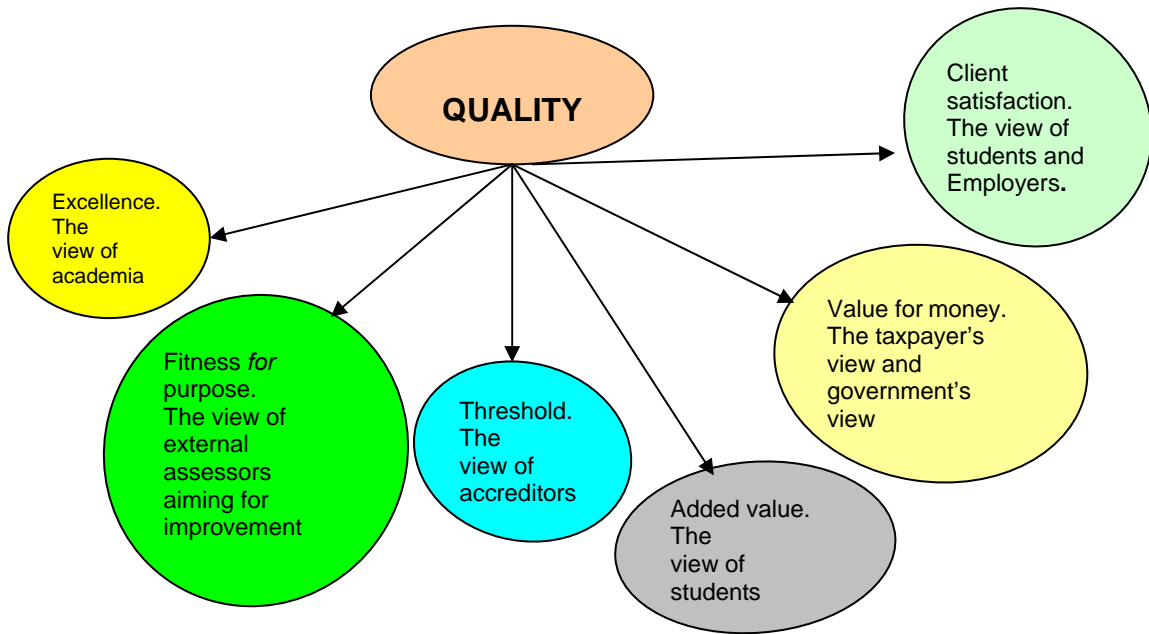
*Figure 1 Different views of quality (**Handbook for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2007)***

The link between quality education and research

As higher education institutions are meant to meet the needs of all their stakeholders, this issue of quality education (the fact that quality is understood differently by different stakeholders) will put them in a difficult position. So they will have to negotiate between the needs of their stakeholders and translate them into goals and objectives which, in turn, will be achieved through the implementation of the three major activities of a higher education institution: (i) teaching/learning, (ii) research and (iii) outreach.

With regard to this, Green as quoted by Inter-University Council for East Africa (2007), states that:

Quality is a matter of negotiating among stakeholders. In this negotiation process, each stakeholder needs to formulate, as clearly as possible, his/her requirements. The university or faculty, as ultimate supplier, must try to reconcile all these different wishes and requirements. Sometimes, the expectations will run parallel, but they can just as well end up in conflict. As much as possible, the requirements of all stakeholders should be translated into the mission and goals of an institution and the objectives of a faculty and of the educational program, and as far as this concerns research, the research program. The challenge is to achieve the goals and objectives. If this is the case, then we can say that the institution, the faculty has "quality") (p.33)

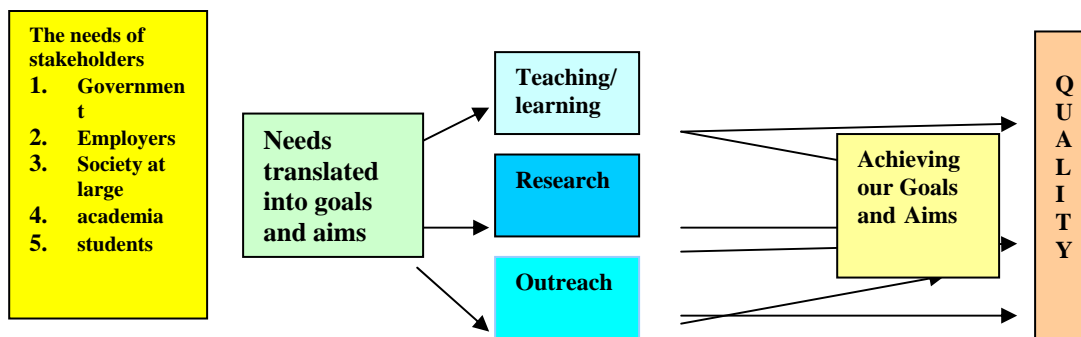Green's idea has been well illustrated by the following figure:

*Figure2. Quality assurance as an object of negotiation between the relevant parties (adapted from **Handbook for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2007) (p33))***

More specifically to research, given that research is part of the core business of an HEI, it must address the needs of stakeholders and this can be done when research attempts to answer the concerns of the various stakeholders incorporated in the aims and goals of the HEI. This, in other words, means all the research agendas outlined in the policies and strategies of the institution should be significantly related with the needs of the stakeholders which are incorporated in the aims and goals of the institution or through this the technological, economic, political needs of the society in general. Spaapen *et al* in this regard stresses, if research has to meet its objectives; it has to mediate between a multitude of interests and values (2007:42) of the society. EUA (2005:34) elucidates that "universities play an important role if they are able to position themselves on the world stage and strengthen the link between education and research, and research and society. Ashcroft (2005:8) in this regard, emphasizes on the importance of meeting "certain criteria with respect to research activity and culture…" in a higher education institution. These criteria as it has been discussed up to now are tied to the needs of all stakeholders of higher education.

Research in East Africa and Ethiopian Universities

Research in East African Universities

A document prepared by Inter-University Council for East Africa (2007: 23) explicates that research was part and parcel of the higher education activities in east Africa, and universities were giving it a very important place in their curricula. Prestigious East African universities like Nairobi and Makerere were significantly engaged in the area.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the volume of research that was carried out was enormous. The University of Nairobi, which is the oldest and biggest public university

in Kenya, probably carried out the highest number of researches in Africa. Even Makerere University conducted several research studies especially in the early 1970s and 1980s (p.23).

Recently however, a decline in research activities in 'virtually all universities in East Africa' (ibid) has been observed. The document states that one of the key factors that have stunted the growth of research in the East African University system is lack of adequate research funds. The little research that is being done by post-graduate students and staff is being supported by funds from donor agencies and organizations (p.23).

Another reason for the shrinking number of researches produced in these universities was 'lack of adequately qualified researchers'. This according to the document 'constitutes the second major constraint to research expansion in the East African higher education institutions (ibid).

The document concludes that, due to these two major reasons, a decline in the growth of research has been registered and its impact on the functioning of the universities and the quality of education that they offer has been felt.

Research in Ethiopian universities

Saint (2004) reveals that, as the 'twentieth century drew to a close; Ethiopia found itself with a higher education system faced with a number of problems. According to him, some of these problems were 'shortage of experienced doctorates among academic staff, declining educational quality, and weak research output'. The higher education system was also inadequately linked with the 'intellectual currents of the international higher education community'. Teshome (2005) argues that 'the quality and relevance of the education and research activities of the (higher education)

institutions are not up to expected standards and levels". According to him, the most important problems in the area of research and publication are "poor infrastructure, high brain drain, and limited resources and inefficiency in the use of available resources".

Bearing these problems in mind, the Ethiopian government currently follows an economic growth strategy based on agriculture-led development. For this strategy to be successful, the country's higher education system should produce graduates with "the technical knowledge and research skills to support economic diversification". For this reason, the government has envisaged both masters and PhD programs as major venues for research in universities and research policies, and strategies to be developed for efficient, transparent, relevant and quality research undertakings in universities (The Education Sector Development Program III, 2005; Saint, 2004).

Review of the quality audit reports of eight public universities published by HERQA in 2008

The quality audit reports published by the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HEQA) show that all of the HEIs audited aspire to contribute to the development of the country through problem solving researches. This is mostly reflected on the visions, missions and goals of the institutions which usually are stated in their strategic plans and other legislative documents. One can perceive that all of the audited universities have firm convictions that research plays a crucial role in developing the economy, thereby reducing the levels of poverty in the country.

Arbaminch Unversity for instance aspires to *conduct relevant, fundamental and problem solving researches,* whereas Jimma University promises *to undertake academically rigorous and socially meaningful cutting edge research, disseminate knowledge and technologies and provide consultancies to the public.* Jimma

University also declares *to train high caliber professionals through community based teaching and team based research*.

In all the audited HEIs there are Research and Publication Offices to help the Academic and Research Vice Presidents assigned by the University Management. Some of them even have developed research policies and guidelines and published various journals. It is also encouraging to see that the audited Universities have created links and research collaborations with organizations within Ethiopia and abroad. These collaborations provide funding, training, technical and managerial support. And the external audit reports show that Mekele, Hawassa, Jimma and Haramaya Universities have been doing a great deal of work in this regard.

Regardless of these efforts, senior staff and administrators indicated that there are a number of hurdles that have to be tackled if the institutions want to realize what they aspire to achieve in their mission and vision statements and ultimately contribute to the development of the economy. Some of these problems identified by the reports can be grouped in four major areas: unclear/absence of research policy and strategy, limited budget, low motivation/moral of staff to engage in research, and heavy workload of staff.

a. **Unclear/absence of research policy and strategy**

Even though almost all problems raised are related to poor or absence of research policy and strategy, and relevant guideline documents in the HEIs, the specific issue was a point of discussion with the academic staff. In one audited HEI, for instance, the EQA team was informed that the university has yet to develop an approved research policy and research strategy and encourage each faculty and department to develop policies, strategies and plans in line with these. In another audited HEI the EQA team

was told that the institution is developing a research strategy but no documentary evidence was made available.

The discussion held with instructors revealed that sufficiently developed research strategy, clear research policies and research plan as well as capacity to obtain external funding for research were not yet developed. In some of the audited HEIs, there are not sufficiently developed systems of either documenting or following up research projects funded by external agencies, whether national or international.

b. Limited budget and research facilities

Review of the external quality audit reports show that in most of the audited HEIs, members of staff were mostly unable to receive enough funds for research projects that they submitted to the research and publication offices. This was expressed during discussions with instructors. The staff complained in most of the discussions held with EQA team that 'funding has not been made available to fully support research proposals from the different faculties'. In addition, inadequacy of infrastructure, particularly lack of vehicles and laboratories were common while researchers were trying to undertake researches with what little fund they could muster from the management. Instructors also expressed that there was considerable uncertainty on the availability of funding, how it was allocated and the purposes for which it could be used with regard to research.

c. Low motivation/moral of staff to engage in research activities

The institutional quality audit reports show that staff members in most of the audited HEIs are not sufficiently attracted to doing research, have little interest in research and have poor incentives to encourage them to engage in it. Some of the factors pointed out for reasons of low motivation in the researchers are poor/absence of mechanisms

of incentives for those who are engaged in the research areas and lack of access to publication of research articles in highly acceptable research journals

d.   Heavy workload of staff

The reports show, in most of the audited HEIs, that although the staffs are supposed to spend 25% of their time on research activities, this does not usually happen. This is mostly due to the reasons of heavy teaching loads.

e. Lack of sufficient training/support for novice and young researchers

In most of the audited Universities instructors reported that there was little training on research provided to novice and young researchers while weak teaming- up of senior and junior staff is common.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the link between quality education and research with the aim of identifying problems hampering the development of research in HEIs and indicating some possible ways as to how HEIs can develop a research culture to create quality education. Having reviewed the relevant related literature and HERQA external quality audit reports published in 2008, the following conclusions have been drawn:

The link between quality education and research

As higher education institutions are required to meet the needs of all their stakeholders- the government, employers, society at large , the academia and students-they will have to negotiate between the needs of their stakeholders and translate them into goals and objectives for their higher education institutions (mission vision and goals) which will, in turn, be achieved through the implementation of the three major activities of higher education institutions: (i) teaching/learning, (ii) research and (iii)

outreach activities . And this is what we call "Fitness for Purpose" the definition of quality higher education accepted by Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA). The link has been well illustrated by figure 2 (see on page 6)

Problems and their resultant effects on research and research culture

Problems

From this brief review of literature and HERQA's external quality audit reports, it can be summarized that some of the major problems that are identified as causes for the low development of research in both the East African and Ethiopian higher institutions are lack of adequately qualified researchers, lack of funding, poor infrastructure, high brain drain, limited resources, inefficiency in the use of available resources and shortage of experienced doctorates among academic staff.   The following table depicts some of their possible causes.

Table I Problems and their possible causes

Problems	Possible Causes

• Lack of adequately qualified researchers,
• Shortage of experienced doctorates among academic staff.
	• Absence/unclear research strategy on
	  - Training of staff on research
	  - Incentive mechanisms
	  - a system where experienced staff can share their experiences to young and inexperienced staff

• lack of funding, • inefficiency in the use of available resources,	• Absence/unclear research strategy on - securing and using funds from outside sources other than government budget • Poor administration and management of the resources • Insufficient funds
• poor infrastructure,	• Absence/unclear research strategy on-securing funds from outside sources

	other than government budget
	• Poor administration and management
	• Insufficient funds
• Low motivation/moral among staff	• Absence of incentive strategy on incentives for those who are engaged in research activities
	• Lack of access to reputable journals

Resultant effects of the problems

These problems in turn resulted in

- weak research output,

- limited publication by the students and staff, and

- Weak research culture.

Some remarks and recommendations related to developing research activities and research culture in HEIs

The following remarks have been made on the basis of the conclusions drawn in order to have a thriving research culture in our higher education institutions:

Clear Research Policy: A higher education institution, above all, should have a clear research policy, setting the direction of research and deciding about research profile and research activities. This is because 'policies and procedures provide frameworks within which higher education institutions can develop and monitor effectiveness of their quality assurance systems" (Inter-University Council for East Africa, 2007). And having a research policy and guidelines and procedures to implement them will be of a great deal of importance to assure the quality of research activities in particular and boost research culture in general. A research policy as stipulated by Inter-University Council for East Africa 'sets the direction of research within the higher education

institutions, specifies objectives of research, indicates research targets, spells out the code of conduct for research and stipulates the responsibility of the research management unit within the HEI' (2007:84-88). And this will help the institution and the community in the institution maintain the integrity of the university, protect the safety and welfare of the employees and experimental subjects, ensure compliance with all other regulations governing the research process, serve as guiding principles to conduct research and development activities and set out the obligation of all researchers to be aware of good conduct in research and comply with institutional and regulatory requirements.

While preparing the policy document, the following points need to be included:

- *Mission statement*
- *Research governance*
- *Academic policies ,academic freedom and research*
- *Objectivity in research policy*
- *Research approval process*
- *Research ethics*
- *Sponsored projects and sponsored research services*
- *Policy on consultancy*
- *policy on undergraduate and graduate research*
- *policy on integrity in research*
- *research supervision and research risk compliance*
- *publications and authorship*
- *conflicts of interest, conflict of commitment, and research misconduct*
- *technology transfer and intellectual property*
- *policy on environmental health and safety*

- *research collaboration and memoranda of understanding*
- *research development fund policy*
- *policy on the protection of human subjects in research*
- *policy on the use of animals in research*
- *Non-academic research appointments*
- *Campus support services and facilities*
- *Research quality an research assessment*

*(*Inter-University Council for East Africa, 2007*)*

Council for Higher Education (2005) poses the following questions in relation to research policies and associated regulations:

1 Is there research policy that clearly outlines the research vision of the institutions: faculty/department/unit/center/group?

2 Are there policies and regulations that apply specifically to postgraduate research?

3 Do the policies and regulations cover all aspects of the research process, including submitting proposals, accessing resources, conducting research and disseminating or commercializing research?

4 Are the policies written with clear rationales, goals, objectives and explicit criteria?

5 Are there policies that relate to the support and development of research, including capacity development of new researches, with due regard to race and gender considerations?

6 Do the policies encourage collaborative and problem solving research at the local/regional/national level?

7   Are there any policies or regulations regarding access to funding and if so, are the criteria and mechanisms for accessing it made clear?

8   Are research policies geared towards increasing research participation, productivity and funding?

9   Do the research policies contain strategies and initiatives that address issues of equity, redress and representativeness?

10 Are policy goals and objectives feasible within the given time frames?

11 Are research policy goals aligned with national goals?

12 Are research policy goals appropriate to the institution's mission and vision?

13 Are the research policies that that exist regularly reviewed and adapted accordingly?

14 Are policies and regulations readily available and accessible to researchers at all levels of the institution?

15 Have sufficient funds been allocated to implement all the policies?

Funding - Appropriate funds should be in place for research activities in all higher education institutions. In the light of the existing pressures on the government's resources, however, it is necessary for institutions themselves to make direct, sustained approaches to the various donors and agencies. This could be achieved if a higher education institution has an appropriate research strategy and policies that can help to tap to available funding and lay out the criteria and mechanisms for making use of it.

Human Resource Development- Human Resource development should be given priority. In the aforementioned discussion, it has been mentioned that one of the problems in a higher education is 'inefficiency in the use of available resources' (Teshome, 2005). In this regard, what the Ethiopian government is trying to achieve

through the training of PhDs and masters holders has a great deal to contribute in this area (Nordling, 2008) as the new PhD programs have been designed to meet the country's development needs in areas such as peace, security, food production, biodiversity and urban growth" (The Guardian, Tuesday, May 13, 2008).

Efficient managers and management systems- Efficient management systems are also crucial to effectively coordinate and use human, material and financial recourses and achieve the goals and aims of the higher education institution. Ashcroft (2004) in this regard has to say the following:

> Good managers … pay attention to the goals and purposes of higher education. Government and other stakeholders invest time and money in higher education in order to secure certain societal, economic and social benefits. These require the academic manager to have clear objectives and achieve integration with institution's mission and strategic plan. It requires skill, knowledge and experience for a manager … (p.3)

This excerpt clearly lays down that government and other stakeholders (see figuer2) are behind the formulation and implementation of aims and objectives of the higher education institutions and the manager is an important instrument to achieve these goals and objectives through his/her efficient skill of directing recourses through the use of his/her well-organized management system in place. For this he/she needs to have, among others the,

- Understanding of and knowledge about teaching, learning, assessment, research and knowledge transfer;
- Understanding of and knowledge about quality, human resources, financial and systems management.

In short, it should be noted that research is not done for research sake or merely as an intellectual or mental exercise which scholars in a higher education institutions should engage in, but it is one of the major means of addressing the needs of the stakeholders through which the social, technological, political needs of the country will be met. Higher education institutions should therefore create an environment where they can encourage research culture by putting appropriate research policies, guidelines and procedures in place so that all the staff and students could participate and contribute towards achieving the goals and aims of the HEIs. Besides, HEIs need to have sufficient research funds, human resource development schemes and efficient management systems.

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