Trajectory of Quality Assurance Practices in Ethiopian Private Universities: Contexts and Challenges in Open and Distance

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Abstract

With the increasing acceptance of Open Distance Learning (ODL) for widening access to higher education in the country, research suggests that it has become increasingly crucial that quality assurance processes need to be developed and maintained if the ODL provision is to be relevant and more functional in emerging open learning environments. This paper examines the status and challenges of quality assurance in private universities which have initiated and implemented an innovative strategy of quality assurance (QA) for continuous improvement. The study employed a mixed methods design with quantitative data used to generate and analyze respondents' knowledge and experience about the practices of teaching-learning in the universities. A qualitative approach was also employed to get deeper explanations about the reasons and possible factors that underlie existing quality assurance practices. Data were collected from five private universities using questionnaire, observation, key informant interview, focus group discussion and document review. Vice presidents, quality assurance directors, deans, teachers and students from the selected private universities served as data sources. Data showed that there are acute quality problems abounding quality of educational inputs, processes and outputs in the five universities studied. Substandard teachers, plagiarism, misconceptions on modularization, poor infrastructures and facilities, program content, program specification, program organization, curriculum design, staff quality and the focus of quality assurance are the main challenges of the teaching-learning practices. These imply that the teaching-learning practice is not effective in bringing the desired outcome on students' performance. When the high pass rate and lower attritions were observed in comparison with the exit exam results, students from the private universities with the highest achievements in CGPA but not passing national exams imply that CGPAs are not necessarily telling the exact picture of students' achievement. The existing 'quantity' based maneuvers rather than quality-education do not help students much in effectively improving their performance in accurate sagacity of 'fit-for-purpose' stance in some universities. Thus, there is need for building the capacity of the academics on quality assurance, modularization, entrepreneurial orientations, innovative skills, attitudes and knowledge demanded by the job market. It is also deemed necessary to endorse a robust institutional and program quality enhancement and assurance effort, and national qualification framework that enhance the quality assurance practices in the universities. Quality assurance at the universities requires work on raising awareness and commitment amongst all staff involved, internal assessment, and integration of quality assurance programs into the university's annual action plans, external assessment and benchmarking.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions; Open Distance Learning; Private Universities, Quality assurance; Quality Enhancement

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Since a couple of decades back, there has been momentous intensification of enrollment accompanied by quality assurance (QA) activities that aimed towards improving higher education at national levels. Stakeholders seeking accountability in higher education have encouraged governments to establish national quality assurance and accreditation agencies. Institutions, such as Higher Education Quality and Relevance Agency (HERQA), Public and Private Higher Education Institutions, and Education Strategy center (ESC), work together and share information about quality standards, benchmarks and best practices (ESC, 2014).

Quality assurance has been defined as "systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements" (Wikipedia; Harman, 2000). Quality assurance facilitates recognition of the standards of awards, serves public accountability purposes, helps inform student choice, contributes to improved teaching learning and administrative processes, and helps disseminate best practices with the goal of leading to overall improvement of higher education systems. Setting common standards and evaluation criteria, however, must take into account diversity and plurality of higher education within national, as well as regional systems. Higher education institutions are challenged to develop new visions, new forms of collaboration across institutions and nations (Mulu, 2012; Harman, 2000).

In the context of education, 'quality' has been placed high on the agenda of educational leaders, policy makers, and practitioners, and is in line with consumers' ever increasing demand for quality education. In many countries, stakeholders have been placing high expectations on their educational systems, compelling institutions to produce higher quality products, services, processes, and by extension, students and graduates (Ayodele, 2013; Tesfaye, 2012). Our government has also been seeking increased levels of accountability from their publicly funded educational institutions. Faced with the globalization of the world economy, coupled with associated challenges of producing high-caliber human resources needed to effectively participate in the global economy, national stakeholders have voiced serious concerns about the 'quality' of their educational provisions to ensure their competitiveness. Thus, the current study was initiated with the following objectives in mind.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1.2.1 General Objective

This research explores the status and challenges of quality assurance practices on the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in the context of private higher education in Ethiopia.

1.2.2 Specific Objectives

- To assess the extent to which quality assurance is being implemented in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Ethiopian private HEIs
- To determine the outcomes of quality assurance system on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Ethiopian HEIs
- To evaluate the challenges that impedes QA practices on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Ethiopian HEIs

2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods design based on the premise that quality assurance in higher education is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that involves the perspectives of different actors and requires the collection and analysis of data drawn from different sources using different methods. The quantitative approach was used to generate and analyze data on respondents' knowledge and experience about quality assurance, whereas the qualitative approach was employed to get deeper explanations about the reasons and possible factors that underlie existing quality assurance practices. Six private universities, namely St. Mary's, Alpha, Unity, Rift Valley and Adams were included in this study. Questionnaires, interviews, documents and a review of the scholarly literature were employed to gather data for this study. SPSS 20 was used to analyze the quantitative data.

Conceptual Frame work of the study

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the study
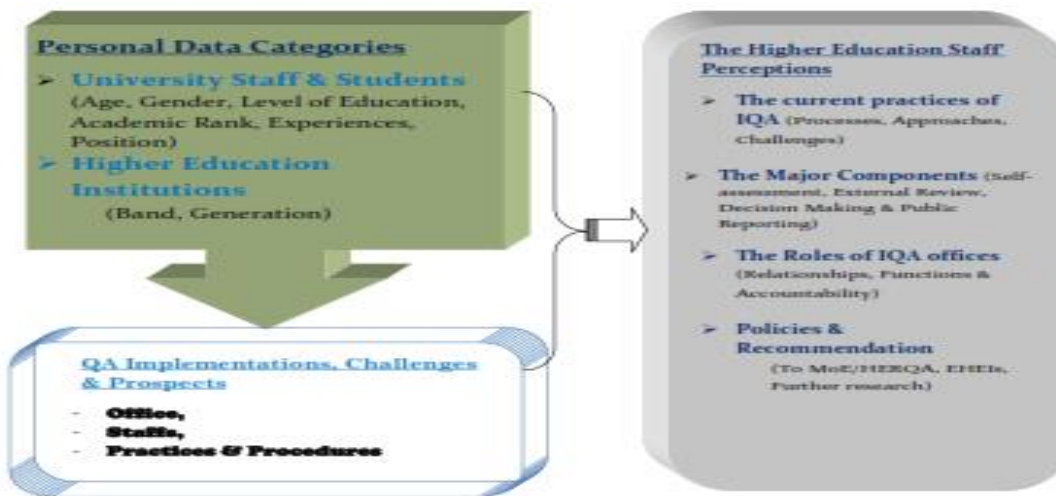
3. Result

3.1. Establishment of a QA Centre and Adoption of QA practices

Many private universities faced constraints and hurdles that made it very hard to put the idea of 'quality' into a concrete practice. Efforts to improve the quality of DE services existed in

universities, albeit very broadly. Based on that, concrete action was taken in the formal establishment of a Quality Assurance System. There was a sound, internal framework for universities' quality assurance system. Guided by the framework, the Committee formulated the university's QA policies in consultation with the university's high officials, followed by in-depth discussions with universities staff in various units (HERQA, 2002). As in any organizational change initiative, however, some staff members reacted unfavorably and chose to retain their timeworn, conventional work styles. Quality improvement, on the other hand, not only necessitates significant effort, commitment, and investment in terms of time, resources and cost, it requires all staff members to question and challenge all they take for granted. Indeed, QA requires significant and active participation from all people within the institution. This not only takes clear direction from leadership, it takes solid, ongoing commitment from all levels to improve universities' quality continuously.

3.2. Implementation of Quality Assurance (QA)

As stated previously, universities adopted the Association of Ethiopian Private Universities (AEPU) and Quality Assurance (QA) policies drafted to assist the member institutions. To contextualize AEPU framework, universities modified the AEPU best practices and developed quality indicators to address its unique institutional needs and relevance within the Ethiopian higher educational context. Universities' implementation of AEPU framework used the following five steps: Development of QA policy manual, Self-evaluation and priority-setting for quality improvement, Development of the QA job manuals, Implementation and revision of the QA job manuals and Continuous evaluation of QA implementation.

3.3. Best Practices and Positive Outcomes

The findings that addressed the third research question of this study indicated that best practices are found in the private universities. Though the level of the practices had been different in terms of their ability to effectively ensure quality, it is arguably vital weak leak in the system. The fundamental conjecture of QA is beached in the instrumental view of higher education, in which the focus is in achieving efficiency and effectiveness. However, the very essence and purpose of QA are defeated due to lack of resource, ownership, capacity and commitment on the part of the university leadership and academic staff. The level of collaborations among the various bodies of the university was crippled to ensure the quality enhancement sought as per the standard. The capacity of the management to effectively manipulate their scarce resource and skilled manpower is under severe challenge. The interconnections among the different actors are weak, institutional linkages are fragile and are posing a grave challenge on quality assurance. This report identified 12 'best practices' under ten main components, and reflects the universities' comprehensive needs to operate quality distance education (DE) programs: Policy and planning (Course plans, Strategic plans, tutorial plans, student support plans, etc), Human resource recruitment and development (Affirmative action, participating women in leadership), Management and administration (Decentralized leadership, limited delegation, Students' union, participation in clubs), Learners

(Presentations, thesis defense, public debates and lectures, experience sharing), Program design and development (Innovative curriculum), Course design and development (Internet based communication and teaching-learning), Learning supports (Do Co-tradition, Affirmative action, Tutorials), Assessment of student learning (Exit exams and), and Media for learning (CD-Libraries, E-learning).

3.4. External Assessment and Accreditation

Apparently, external quality assessments force institutions into proving the 'soundness' of their QA systems. Such audits typically review documented procedures and physical products versus actual performance. To gain this valuable outside perspective, universities invite quality assessors from different outside agencies to assess its overall performance. Such agencies include the *International Council for Open and Distance Education* (ICDE); the *International Standards Agency* (ISA); the *International Organization for Standardization* (ISO); and the *Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency (HERQA).* However, there was no evidence about the former two agencies working with Ethiopian private higher institutions (PHEIs). The third external auditor is the HERQA. This is an accreditation certification Agency that emphasizes the quality of input while defining it from the perspectives of output (fit-for purpose) of education at academic department/study program level. No consideration was given for the '*processes'*. Even the output cannot be measured using CGPA and attrition rates for they are not telling the true picture of students' performance. Ironically, most (greater than 95%) of the students who sat for the exit exam are not passing while 72% of them scored "A" and "B" grades and excellent points from the externship (85%).

The assessment is done through desk evaluation of the university's portfolio, the Study Program's Self-Evaluation Report and completed accreditation instruments, as well as site visit that includes observations and interviews with representatives of the university's and the faculty's top management, support staff, tutors, and students. The accreditation is granted to individual study programs within a university. Once the respective study program has fulfilled the performance indicators set by the Agency, the accreditation status is valid for five years and it has to be maintained regularly. This practice, however, has to be looked into. HERQA, as external quality assessor, emphasizes in slightly different aspects of universities' management, services and products. Accordingly, the private universities are confident to move progressively in its QA system. The private universities consider the external quality audit as important as the internal QA process. However, they don't get any assistance for capacity building and technical support. The most important part of the accreditation process is not in the obtainment of the certificate but more in the course of action of getting it. The universities misused it on the contrary. The process of getting each certification and or accreditation has not equally enforced all parties involved to diligently follow the standardized guideline and assure that all the services and products satisfy the main stakeholders.

3.5. Challenges of Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Education

Open and distance learning programs are not as effective as full time immersion in a learning

community. Leaning is most effective when it is a student's fulltime-job (Egbokhare, 2006). This is the more reason why quality of programs must be maintained in order to at least produce justified learning outcomes. Ayodole (2013) has identified some of the challenges facing Open and distance education in developing countries include the following:

3.5.1.Economic Feasibility

The production and delivery of the course, module or unit are the main challenges. Are they cost effective? Do student numbers in each presentation, and the number of presentations before revision, make the required investment worthwhile? Would it be more cost effective to buy in a course, direct students elsewhere or work in partnership with other organizations to achieve economies of scale?

3.5.2. Teaching Aids and Materials

Owing to their nature, open and distance learning environments make use of an array of audio, video and textual material, in a variety of ways in teaching; the issue now is what criteria do they adopt in determining the most appropriate media for their needs and how do they deploy these in an ODL context. Furthermore, how can institutions make use of the powerful interactive features of Communications and Information Technology to achieve best results?

3.5.3. Student Support and Motivation

The issue of widening access and participation bring adults and disadvantaged groups into the university. How can we best support our students and improve retention and what diagnostic/ developmental materials will be needed?

3.5.4. Capacity Building Training of Staff and Technical Assistance

Swinging from being a traditional, face–to–face teacher, to an online facilitator is not easy. What measures should be put in place to train open and distance education lecturers? What briefing and training should be provided to transform lecturers into e-Moderators or e-experts? Furthermore, with an increase in part-time students, or fulltime students who work part time, the need for technical support is highly important. What provision should be   made for technical support for students during evenings, weekends and other time zones?

3.5.5. Students' Evaluation

Assessments can assume different modalities. According to Wellar (2000), in a conventional teaching situation the demeanour of students, quizzical looks and raised hands often signify a problem in communication or understanding. However, in an ODL context this is more difficult– especially if the tutor never sees the student and is separated in time and space! What procedures should be put in place to test or trial test actual materials, systems and procedures before a course is offered to students?

3.5.6. Inclusiveness

Diversity in Open and distance education is an opportunity rather than a threat. The Special Educational Needs Disability Act (2001) requires institutions to be anticipatory to put procedures and practices in place in the expectation that those requiring alternative forms of delivery can gain ready access. How can Open and Learning environments meet the needs of communication impaired students? Furthermore, what systems can be put in place to ensure the various media-audio, video, text etc to ensure that the needs of communication impaired students are taken care of?

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1. Conclusion

It can be concluded from private universities' endeavors and experiences in QA implementation that quality assurance was mainstreamed at institution and program level. Simply put, universities were highly motivated about implementing quality assurance. Apparently, principles of quality assurance (QA) were well thought out, well-planned, fully integrated operational strategies at the universities. QA implementation requires shared responsibility of all universities' staff and management. Universities' leadership provided clear direction, supervision and resources, and communicated clearly to all stakeholders involved. Challenging and changing prevailing mindsets was essential to enhance quality. Quality Assurance (QA) can only work when everyone is fully aware of and understands what is involved, and that it takes effort and commitment to make 'quality' happen. And it can only happen when all stakeholders from students and frontline staff, to university leadership and government, has input.

Quality assurance is not yet taken as an essential element for improving organizational efficiency and effectiveness, or increasing public accountability. To confront the challenges of implementing QA, universities are not ready and unwilling to adapt, change, and innovate. Quality assurance activities are not clear and transparent and, more importantly, they are not achievable and able to meet customer expectations. When QA systems and procedures are not clear and undefined, ODL institutions can never meet high quality standards. Internal and external audits do not take place so that institutions cannot track their performance, address any weaknesses, and build upon their successes. Open and Distance (ODL) institutions are not fully accountable to all stakeholders whether they are government officials, taxpayers, employees, or students. Private higher education institutions that embrace QA principles are not constantly striving to improve the quality of their work. Above all, open and distance institutions are not open for change and innovation, and not ready to adapt and engage in global partnerships and competition. Benchmarks and audits are not happening regularly and don't involve staff and management from all levels. Quality assurance is not being implemented with strong commitment from every stakeholder, from institutional leadership to front line staff, from taxpayers to students view point. In sum, quality assurance as a management strategy was not considered an effective approach to achieve excellence among the private universities.

Academic reviews were done intermittently as academics in individual program or units are not motivated to scrutinize what works and what does not work well and if they are meeting their goals or not. Separate units do not perform effectively to ascertain benchmarks; the private universities are not in a shape to undertake remedial actions to help these units improve their performance.

Private universities' staff were not evaluated throughout the year in order to monitor their performance. At the end of the year, individual and unit performance is not assessed in terms of actual achievement *vis-à-vis* established benchmarks. Most staffs or units are found to fall short of their performance goals, thus, systems and procedures are not examined carefully to ensure they have the skills, tools, and knowledge they need to improve. Performance is not directly linked to incentives and compensation, with high performers being rewarded for their effort, innovation and abilities. Finally, the private universities in general and the open and distance learning programs are not in a good state to implement quality assurance.

4.2. Recommendations

The following are recommendations for MoE, HERQA and Private HE Institutions:

R1. **Cooperation, Partnership, Collaboration**: - There must be a university system to minimize plagiarism, share best practices, promote evidence-based decisions, make periodic external auditing, based on which accredited programs and institutions work towards quality. Periodic & meaningful supervision by MoE, Harmonizing the structure of quality assurance directorate across universities, and introducing qualification exam are needed

R2. Capacity Building: - there should be unreserved effort to develop teachers professionally, strengthen the inter and intra relationship among universities, work to break the vicious circle of quality problem and investigate the reasons for self-serving bias, empower the quality assurance and enhancement directorate, work to capacitate the university management, and allocate adequate budget to the effort.

R3. **Enhance e-learning, student-centered practices;** collect feedback from regular tracer and alumni studies

R4. Exit exam/competency tests/ should be instilled for all graduating students from all programs at national level.

R5. There must be repercussions or sanctions for compromising quality education

4.3. Recommendations for Further Research

Generalizability of this study for the entirety of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in all universities is not advised due to its sampling. This research should be supported by an in-depth study to get reliable pictures of the teaching-learning practices in the private universities.

Acknowledgement

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