Higher Education: Quality, Quality Assurance, the Concept and its Elements and HERQA’s Focus Areas

Tesfaye Teshome
Director General, HERQA, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Introduction
The economic and social development of any given nation is dependent on the development level of the higher education sector. The importance and contribution of the higher education sector is obvious as it provides the human resources required for leadership, management, business and professional positions (Teshome, 2003). Consequently, since 1991 Ethiopia has expanded its higher education sector. To date Ethiopia has made a considerable progress in the area expansion. Currently there are 31 public and more than 66 private degree-offering higher education institutions in the country.

Since expansion alone would not lead to quality educations provision the Ethiopian government established Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) in 2003 through the proclamation number 350 which is later amended through the proclamation number 650/2009. HERQA is mandated to assure quality education provision in public universities and private higher education institutions. These HEIs are entrusted with public responsibilities to discharge their duties in effective and efficient way so that the industry is provided with competent work force.

Since its establishment HERQA has developed quality assurance systems and introduce the systems for achieving quality education provision and meet set objectives by the higher education institutions. Currently through the institutional quality audit reports and accreditations undertaken institutions and the public at large know their strengths and weaknesses and can make informed decision with regard to the programs they want to attend and the private higher education institutions they would like to join. This paper thus discusses quality concepts, standards and protocols developed by HERQA and major issues worth considering for further actions by higher education institutions for best results.

What is Quality?
It is very difficult to reach at a single and well agreed definition on the concept of quality. This is mainly because different segments of the society define the concept of quality in their own terms and perspectives. For instance, Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA, 2005) defined quality as ‘fitness for purpose’ as a regulatory body established in 2003 to assure relevance and quality education provision in all higher education institutions in Ethiopia. For HERQA quality education provision is assured provided every program launched in a department has defined purpose that meets specific needs of the industry in particular and the nation’s development agenda in general. Similarly for a university academic staff quality means ‘academic excellence’. Most academic staff believe that their university is the best if there is a strong pride in the successful comparison between the level of academic achievement in terms of high-level teaching and frontline research of the own department and other well respected departments in various parts of the world.
Quality can also be defined as ‘compliance with set standards or zero error’. This definition holds true for both manufacturing and service giving industries as well as higher education institutions; but with slight difference. Products can be produced with zero error in an industry as the production system is very well controllable starting from the raw material supply and the labor as input parameters, to the process it passes through and the end product as an output. The situation in higher education is however unique as students are humans who join universities with reasonable prior knowledge, skill and attitude. Hence, quality in higher education should be understood in different ways as the quality model they pass through in the university system is more process oriented. This is mainly because students undergo change and become more informed, mature and develop as persons, intellectually, socially and psychologically.

The other definition of quality is satisfaction of customers. Every higher education institution has students as most important customers and caters for their wishes and interests. Universities which offer better teaching and learning, research and community based service opportunities are always preferred by many students. Such facilities undoubtedly enable students to acquire the necessary knowledge, skill and attitude which eventually make them competent in the market. Employers are also customers of universities among many and they have to meet their expectations and make them satisfied. For an employer, ‘quality’ of the graduate is seen as a measure of the ‘quality’ of the university. For him, it means that the graduate is apt for the job the employer has to offer, and is of a sufficiently high professional level to function well at that level.

Quality is also defined as meeting threshold or minimum standard, as a process of enhancement and as ‘fitness of purpose’. The definition of quality as ‘fitness of purpose’ holds true when an element of comparison is embedded with some kind of benchmark. In fact, all of these definitions are valid, and it is very possible to add more to the list. Many factors play a role in assessing the quality, and these may differ in focus. This is an important observation that needs to be taken into account when higher education institutions embark on quality assessment.

The Quality Model

Having examined various definitions of quality as perceived by many, HERQA agreed with all higher education institutions, professional bodies and other concerned bodies on ‘fitness for purpose’ as a working definition of quality in Ethiopia (HERQA, 2005). The quality model HERQA currently uses has three elements; input, process and output (HERQA, 2005). One of the inputs is the design of a curriculum which eventually leads to the development of an educational program in a given department. It should emanate from the needs of stakeholders namely the students, parents, employers, government and the society at large. Any department that fails to overlook such approach will be unsuccessful to meet requirements of the industry and community and would be unable to respond to ever increasing demands of the stakeholder. Consulting government strategic and policy documents, feasibility study on the skills demanded by the industry help institutions to prepare a road map for the preparation of sound curriculum and launching of a program responsive to the industry (Figure 1).

Higher education institutions that transform the needs and demands of the stakeholders into goals and aims and finally to educational activities, research undertakings and community outreach activities achieve set goals, standards and maintain quality.
What is Quality Assurance?
Quality assurance is the whole range of actions and mechanisms that support quality in higher education. Successful higher education institutions design and plan and set up a built-in self-assessment bodies systematically at all levels to assure quality education provision on offer. Quite a number of public and private higher education institutions set up quality assurance units and assess the provision of quality education they offer periodically. These quality assurance units also assist universities to design mechanism for controlling, guaranteeing and promoting quality. Quality assurance is being carried out at the institutional level internally and by external quality assurance agency like HERQA. HERQA so far has undertaken more than 29 external quality audits, produced reports and distributed to all concerned bodies for further action. In the current budget year 12 institutions are being audited. As a support mechanism and improvement quality assurance include a range of activities to be undertaken that repeat themselves in cyclic fashion (Figure 2).

How does a HEIs Assure Quality?
Higher education institutions assure educational programs they offer through three mechanisms: internal self study or assessment, an external review based on the self assessment and monitoring and follow up.

Internal Quality Assurance
Higher education institutions can assure educational programs they offer internally and externally. Internally, each higher education institution is obliged to make sure that its program’s policies and mechanisms fulfill its own purposes and objectives, as well as they meet set standards in general, or to the profession or discipline in particular. Such quality assurance self-assessment approaches could be applied at departmental or institutional levels and help institutions whether they produce competent workforce that is demanded by the labor market or not (Figure 2).
Conversely, external government or non-government bodies, possibly a quality assurance agency such HERQA, assesses the operation of the institution or its programs, to determine whether it is meeting the agreed standards or assure quality through accreditation, assessment or audit (International Institute for Educational Planning, 2009). One form of quality assurance would be, according to IIEP (2006), the procedure through which government policies call on HEIs both public and private to go through some form of external scrutiny in order to provide public assurances that they offer worthwhile services to society. Studying the self evaluation document, a team of experts gather evidences, collect, analyze and interpret empirical data from the institution and finally highlight elements of good practices and suggests cluster of recommendations on all set standards. The institutional or program level external quality audit reports also check whether the set standards are met or not. HERQA disseminates such reports to all concerned bodies and expect HEIs to look into the recommendations made critically and come up with quality enhancement plan as monitoring and follow up which should be executed to address some quality concerns and challenges. Unfortunately very few HEIs, both public and private, give due attentions to the institutional quality audit reports and the recommendations made.

The Process of Quality Assurance

The quality assurance process comprises three distinct stages: assessment, preparation of report and follow-up action. During the assessment stage a group of trained auditors study the self assessment document of the institution and gather relevant data and information, process and analysis. They also assess inputs, processes and outcomes against predetermined objectives, standards or criteria and undertake external review and validation of assessment. They produce an institutional or program level audit report and HERQA submits to the institution to factual errors and under or over representations of various components of the audit process. The outcome would be the production of a public audit report at institutional level and if it is program level it would be accreditation decision. The third stage is the follow up stage which deals with the immediate changes and improvement actions institutions possibly take.
Focus Areas of HERQA during external QA Processes at Institutional Level

HERQA has identified the following ten key aspects of operations which will form the focus areas for quality audits in Ethiopian HEIs.

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. Program Relevance and Curriculum
7. Teaching, Learning and Assessment
8. Student Progression and Graduate Outcomes
9. Research and Outreach Activities
10. Internal Quality Assurance

What is Program Evaluation?

Program evaluation is a systematic approach to address questions that provide information about the quality of a program in order to assist decision making aimed at program (HERQA, 2013):

- improvement,
- development or
- accountability and to contribute to a recognized level of value

Questions asked During Program Evaluation:

1. What is working well in the Program?
A program evaluation involves the assessment of all the elements of a program. As indicated in Figure 3, the assessment ranges from the program specification to the content of the program and assessment of students. The quality of the staff (both academic and support), the infrastructure and services such as guidance and counseling academic advisory services are also assessed in order to know what is working well and what is not. In other words, to have a good knowledge of the program, it is important to have a mechanism that can effectively be used to describe and analyze how these elements are functioning. How might we improve it?

2. What difference does the program make, for whom and under what circumstances?
It is important for a program assessment to answer the question whether or not the program offered by an HEI makes a difference on the economy of the country in general and employability of graduates in particular. One of the mandates of HERQA given to it by Higher Education Proclamation 650/2009 Article 79:5 is to make sure that the programs offered by higher education institutions contribute to the current needs of the country. It stipulates that the Agency is established “to ensure that higher education and training offered at any institution are in line with economic, social and other relevant policies of the country”. Hence the following questions need to be asked and addressed.

1. What is working well in the program?
2. How might we improve it?
3. What difference does the program make, for whom and under what circumstances?
4. Does the program contribute to achieving the core mission of the institution?
5. What is being developed in the program, and what are its merits?

A program is basically assessed on the basis of the question whether or not it is geared towards achieving the institution’s core mission and goals.

The Contents of Program Self-evaluation Document
1. The purpose of the Evaluation
2. The purpose of the Program
3. The Program Context
4. The evaluation of quality and relevance
5. Findings
6. Limitations
7. Strengths
8. Good Practices

The Purposes of the Evaluation
- **Program improvement** – making better the quality and operation of a program;
- **Accountability** - determining whether program expectations have been met
- **Program Impact** - determining whether the program made a difference and is worthwhile
- **Knowledge Generation** - exploring the nature and effects of a program as a way to contribute to the existing knowledge base or to develop a new program.

The Purpose of Program Self-Evaluation
In the process of preparing the self evaluation, the first task of the self evaluation committee established by a higher education institution will be to clarify the purpose of the program. This will be of an enormous importance for the external auditors who will certainly be using the self evaluation document during external program audit. Once the purposes are clearly stated the Committee should move to stating who the program is intended to serve, what the
program intends to do in order to bring about the expected behavioral, competency and other changes on the graduates, and what kinds of resources are needed to operate and manage the program.

In order to do this, in addition to having a series of discussions with those individuals who have played and are still playing in the design and implementation of the program, the Committee can consult written program proposal materials, guidelines of the QA agency, program materials, management documents, and past evaluation reports.

The Program Context
Knowledge of the program context is one of the preconditions of a self or external program evaluation because our judgment of a program is dependent on the context under which it is operating. By program context we mean the organizational, political and social context of a program, why the program is thought to be necessary and what needs are being addressed, the nature and purpose of the institution.

The Evaluation of Quality and Relevance
This is the most important stage in the process of self evaluation. It requires the self evaluation committee to assess the institution on the basis of the following ten focus areas:

1. Program Aims, Goals, and Learning Outcomes
2. Governance, Leadership, and Administration
3. Educational Resources
4. Academic and Support Staff
5. Student Admission and Support Services
6. Program Relevance and Curriculum
7. Teaching, Learning and Assessment
8. Student Progression and Graduate Outcomes
9. Continual Quality Assurance
10. Research and Development and Educational Exchanges

Each focus area should be described and analyzed based on the standards set by the higher education institution and the detailed reference points presented in HERQA (2013) Program Level Evaluation Guideline and appropriate conclusions should be drawn accordingly.

Findings
Having analyzed each focus areas and drawn conclusions from the analysis, the self evaluation committee is expected to weave the findings on the ten focus areas together to create cohesive answers to the questions stated above. This weaving of findings is known as “triangulation” and is standard professional practice in both the field of applied social sciences and the field of evaluation. Triangulation is using different types of data from different sources to get different perspectives on the answer to the same question. The basic idea underpinning the concept of triangulation, according to Given (2008), is that the phenomena under study can be understood best when approached with a variety or a combination of research methods. Triangulation is most commonly used in data collection and analysis techniques, but it also applies to sources of data. Weaving the data together in the analysis, the results should be a cohesive answer to an evaluation question. This is the ultimate aim in reporting program evaluation findings.
Limitations and Strengths
In this section, the evaluators are expected to put the summary of the limitations and strengths of each focus area. The idea here is the whole evaluation process addresses all the elements under the three dimensions of quality assurance-input, process and output.

Good Practices
The HEI should:
• Highlight what it considers to be its good practices and the evidence for the claims made in all areas.
• Indicate how the good practices arose and how the HEI disseminated these (or plans` to do so) and the results. Evidence of impact should be cited.

Plans for Enhancement of Processes and Practices
Once a higher education institution is audited and an audit report produced and distributed, higher education institutions are expected to submit quality enhancement plan to HERQA where HEROQA undertake assessment of the realizations of the plan and pin point issues that deserve high attention before the next audit cycle comes into effect. Consequently, HEIs should:
• reflect on its strengths and weaknesses and
• make clear how it is taking steps (or has concrete plans) to build on its strengths and remedy weaknesses.

Ethiopian HEIs: Major Strengths, Limitations & Ways Forward
There is evidence of good and exemplary practice in all focus areas in most HEIs. Management and governance are the two focus areas with the greatest number of commendations. Good practices are observed in both government and private higher education institutions.

There are also some system weaknesses among which these two are the major ones. Most audited HEIs operate without effective ways of monitoring and reviewing implementation and progress and educational outcomes. The appointment of academic staff with the government recommended ratio of bachelors, masters and PhD degrees for both government and private institutions is a challenge.

It is high time for HEIs to establish university-industry linkage and focus on joint research undertakings if they have to prove their survival and respond to the industry and community needs. Develop a mechanism to assess the market need and focus on to produce competent workforce and professionals employers’ needs and even go beyond to equip graduates with entrepreneurial skill to be self employing.

Issues worth considering by Regional, Zone & Woreda BOE & BOH: Accreditation of Private Providers
This symposium on quality of education has involved the participation of all stakeholders including policy makers and regulatory bodies from regional, zonal and woreda BOE and BOH. Regulatory bodies and policy makers are thus hereby notified to
• Make sure that all programs offered by private HEIs have accreditation from HERQA
- Make sure that such accreditations are valid
- Make sure that all relevant facilities are in place
- Make sure that all programs are being carried out as scheduled
- Make sure that all practical sessions for health programs are being carried out as stated in the curriculum
- Collaboration with relevant bodies

Conclusion
The efforts and achievements of Ethiopian higher education are remarkable and the higher education institutions are trying to do the best they can under the challenging circumstances. Nevertheless, the shortcomings, some quite worrying must also be recognized if the sector as a whole is to continue to improve and Ethiopia’s graduates to compete with their global counterparts.

References