The Evolving Quality Assurance Framework in Ethiopian Higher Education

By

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Introduction

Even if the issue of quality education becomes a top agenda all over the world, there is still little agreement as to what quality itself means and indicators to be used to measure it fairly. That is why some scholars contemplate that quality tends to be a real example that illustrates the saying "meaning is on the beholder" (Adane & Dawit, 2001). However, the general concept of quality in education is highly related to learners, learning environment, content, process and outcomes (UNICEF, 2000; Chapman & Adams, 2002). Whatever the meaning is, quality is said to be at the heart of any education system (UNESCO, 2008; Derebssa, 2005).

The Evolving Quality Assurance Framework in Ethiopian Higher Education was authored by Wondwosen Tamrat, Assistant Professor at St. Mary's University College, and published by St. Mary's University College Printing Press in July 2012. Though not directly portrayed in the book, the purpose of

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the book seems to figure out the historical emergence, major elements and existing challenges of quality assurance practices in Ethiopian Higher Education since 2003.

Almost the entire content, illustrations and arguments in *The Evolving Quality Assurance Framework in Ethiopian Higher Education* is about the rigors, merits and demerits, concerns and achievements of Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency, hereafter HERQA, within a decade life span. As a basis, the author has exhaustively exploited valuable information from Higher Education Proclamations, proclamation No. 351/2003 and proclamation No. 650/2009. On top of this, he has effectively extracted considerable data from HERQA's strategic plan, quality audit report, and many of his own work experience in higher education. In 2008, the author published a book titled *"The Anatomy of Private Higher Education in Ethiopia"*, which might have helped him as a footstep to his current work.

Content Overview

The Evolving Quality Assurance Framework in Ethiopian Higher Education is a thoroughly organized, carefully edited work which emphasizes more of practical than philosophical aspects of higher education in Ethiopia. The book has seven chapters that intensively narrate the history, practices, major elements and challenges of quality assurance practices in Ethiopian Higher Education, with particular reference to the private sectors.

Under the preliminary section, helpful outlines of the upcoming chapters, tables, figures, definitions of important terms and acronyms are provided. The first chapter of the book, which is entirely about theoretical underpinnings of education quality, lays philosophical background for the latter six chapters. The next five chapters depict factors that forced the establishment of quality assurance system, creation of HERQA, accreditation, surprise visits, institutional quality audit and existing quality management system of the Ethiopian higher education. In these chapters, a

multitude content of the text are extracted from other sources such as Higher Education Proclamation (FDRE, 2003; FDRE, 2009), various HERQA's documents and as a result, it looks a compile of previous works. The seventh chapter, however, contains substantial remarks the author assertively forwarded to Higher Education Quality Assurance stakeholders so that the existing quality assurance practices get reconciliation. Very briefly, the content of the book is on the basis of HERQA's inception, establishment, challenges and accomplishments with magnificent favor of private providers. The author argued that the Ethiopian higher education quality assurance framework is evolving because of the growth, enrichments, changing features and valuable experiences gained over the last decade are abundant.

Evaluative Comments

In the present decade, the issue of quality education remained a sensitive agenda for policy makers, academicians, researchers, students and the community at large. From this point of view, I absolutely consent that the author has brought a timely issue to be communicated to the public. The contribution of the book is valued because of the evidences and arguments incorporated in the book are vital to enhance better understanding of the readers on quality concerns of Ethiopian higher education. More than ever before, the Ethiopian government is insisting higher education institutions to rely on their own internal quality management system and from such point of view; this book can be valuable source of inputs for institutional capacity development. Among many strengths of the book, the following are only few, as observed by the reviewer. The author has moderately attempted to address some vital implications to policy makers, stakeholders and researchers so as to create more public accountability and safeguard the future Ethiopian higher education with equal pressure on both public and private providers. The following extract from the book can magnify this point.

> The quality assurance mechanisms so far introduced at national level are pre/initial accreditation, re-accreditation, surprise visit, and institutional quality audit. With the exception of quality audit, the rest have been exclusively applied to the private sector… (P. 48).

On page 56, the author describes that 10 members sit on HERQA board, according to Article 84 of proclamation No.351/2003, to be nominated from associations of Ethiopian public and private higher institutions, Ethiopian Chamber of Commerce and noticeable academicians. Practically, it is disclosed in this book that the number of the board members has never exceeded 6 because of various reasons among which public institutions failure to have their own association is the major one. Honestly, it would be a concern how the agency became lenient over such failure observed on behalf of public higher education institutions. One may also enquire, "When will these public institutions form their own association?"

Some points entertained by the author ask seriously HERQA to evaluate its own capacity in assuring quality higher education provision and keeping up with more public accountability. The following are extracts from the book as illustration.

> Since it gets substantial budget from the government, this excessive dependence is thought to have been influencing HERQA to act in accordance with wills and aspirations of the government and compromise on its ability to make independent decisions (p. 52).

Article 78 of the proclamation, however, states that the agency is an autonomous organ having its own legal personality (FRDE, 2003).

Although the book is trustworthy by the coverage of its contents and the way it is organized, there are some issues that require critique. The following are only few of the eminent pitfalls of the book.

The major doubt I have, among other things, is about the central idea of the book. The author tries to conceptualize quality assurance mechanisms in the Ethiopian higher education system such as pre-accreditation, accreditation, re-accreditation, surprise visit and institutional quality audit and provided detailed explanation for each practice. However, the basic assumptions, principles and standards of the framework are not precisely depicted in the book. As a result, it would be a serious task even for a curious reader to understand the Ethiopian higher education quality assurance framework and its underlying principles from this book. A large portion of the book overemphasizes the status, experiences and complains of private higher education institutions. In many of his arguments, the author has persistently reflected the pressure brought on private higher education institutions by HERQA than conceptualizing the central theme of the book; i.e., the quality assurance framework.

The other serious weakness of the book is the author's reservation to enrich his work with conceptual issues related to quality in education. The main content of the book starts with theoretical aspects, defining quality in education, analytical framework as described by the author. In fact, the author himself has admitted how much defining quality in education cannot be an easy task. Similarly, abundant sources justify that defining and precisely measuring quality in education is a complex job (Adane & Dawit, 2001; Baker, 2003; Amare *et.al*, 2006; UNESCO, 2011). Realizing this nature, some scholars symbolize the concept of quality in education with hydra, a malevolent snake with many heads that grew again and again when cut off as used to be told in Greek mythology (Rayner & Tesfaye, 2005).These scholars use such metaphor to underline the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept which can be defined differently depending on a country's policy and underlying philosophies.

Nevertheless, the author of the current book has cited, what he called it the "most oft-quoted" and comprehensive definition of quality in education given by Harvey and Green (1993) and Harvey (2007). These scholars propose quality as excellence or perfection, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and quality as transformation. Of course, some scholars who have real experience of Ethiopian education system; for example, Lue (2005) remarks that such conceptions of education quality are not mutually exclusive in Ethiopian case. However, I am afraid whether such general descriptions could precisely indicate what "quality" means in education sector and adds some value to the Ethiopian context, where many of us are in a state of confusion about what to do to bring forth education quality and what not to do.

In some cases, there is a focus on five pillars of quality education described as learners, learning environments, contents, processes and outcomes (UNICEF, 2000, Chapman & Adams, 2002). However, the author of *The Evolving Quality Assurance Framework in Ethiopian Higher Education* is not specific to such pertinent points that could make better sense to our academicians and policy makers and also more related to our education quality assurance endeavors. On the other hand, quality in higher education perspective is not a simple thing to be addressed by such general descriptions; it is rather a dynamic entity that various factors such as leadership, curriculum, governance, research and learning, infrastructure facilities, environment and assessment procedures can leave a heavy impact upon it (Batool & Hussain, 2006).

With regard to some critical issues that deserve firm reaction, the author passively skips over it, probably not to challenge the line authority. The following can be an indicator.

> Though quality concerns formed part of discussion on educational reform and policy directions way before the creation of private institutions in Ethiopia, quality assurance mechanisms like accreditation were introduced as a response to the birth of private providers (p.45).

If there had been quality concerns even prior to the expansion of private institutions, ''what should have the government done to respond to the public interest?" On the basis of the higher education proclamation, it would have been fair if the author had officially argued that public higher institutions should also pass through strict pre-accreditation and accreditation steps like their private counterparts. Some scholars assert that accreditation provides standard of excellence that encourages educational institutions to improve their programs and grant public accountability for their educational quality (Mekasha, 2005).

On the other hand, it is persistently addressed that HERQA presents itself as control oriented agency, rather than acting as quality improvement partner. In many sections, the author has negatively reacted against HERQA's solely pressure upon private institutions, the way surprise visits are conducted and HERQA's focus on input aspects than process during accreditation works.

From the very beginning, Article 80 of the Higher Education Proclamation (No.351/2003) states that "The objective of the Agency is to supervise the relevance and quality of higher education offered by any institution". Moreover, Article 82 of the proclamation portrays that, "The Agency shall ensure that higher education and training offered at any institution are up to the standard, relevant and have quality".

Thus, as an organ established to carry out such a critical responsibility, it would be unwise to imagine that HERQA has to be free of any control measure within supervisory role, even if its prime focus is support provision and improvement. Truly speaking, it sounds reasonable that HERQA has to be equally responsive to both public as well as private institutions, as quality

issues should not be an excuse for public higher education institutions especially during this rampant expansion period.

Conclusion

Although the author of *The Evolving Quality Assurance Framework in Ethiopian Higher Education* admits that it took him only three years to write the book, it is possible to understand that the inception of the book goes back to 2003, when HERQA's establishment was proclaimed. On one hand, this book can be considered as one of HERQA's major publications because the author has dully extracted from HERQA's strategic plan, audit reports, newsletters and effectively portrayed the challenges, merits and demerits of the agency. On the other hand, the book has effectively disclosed the exclusive pains faced by private higher education institutions from HERQA. Acting as spokesman of the private sector, the author has forwarded many complaints and objections on HERQA's limitless power over private providers.

Furthermore, the author has systematically forwarded tremendous implications to the Ethiopian higher education stakeholders, particularly, to the Ministry of Education and HERQA. Among many others, the following statement is found to be impressively conveying such idea. "If at all there are serious ramifications of the higher education expansion in the future, one major source would be the compliancy currently exhibited by HERQA with regard to making the public sector unaccountable" (p.165).

In general, despite the fact that it appears a compile of HERQA's previous works, the book is a thoroughly organized work that must be read for holistic purpose. All academicians, researchers, students, parents and policy makers who are interested in Ethiopian education quality assurance practices need to have this book for the pertinent information it provides them.

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