

Quality of Education in Private Higher Institutions in Ethiopia: The Role of Governance

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Abstract

Quality higher education is considered as one of the major elements that guarantee sustainable economic and social development at the national and regional levels of a given economy. This study identified factors of leadership and governance in private higher education institutions in Ethiopia that may contribute to a declining quality of education. Employing a qualitative case study methodology, administrators in six private higher education institutions in Ethiopia were interviewed and their perspectives were compared with other publicly available information. Results indicate that these institutions are continuously challenged to balance government requirements and stakeholder demands in an environment where under funding, scarcity of qualified instructors, poor infrastructure, poorly qualified students, and a biased regulatory environment are being exhibited. In addition, the study revealed that most educational leaders believed that addressing more effective governance can improve educational quality significantly. Recommendations for policy makers, regulators, and leaders of higher education institutions include ensuring availability and proper utilization of qualified instructors, adequate infrastructure, autonomous quality assurance units, and more equitable regulation and enforcement of provisions across the higher education sector.

Keywords

higher education institutions, private universities, educational quality, quality assurance, governance, leadership, Ethiopia

Introduction

To be part of the globalized world, every nation must transform itself to develop its economy and compete effectively. As the world becomes more connected, the global economy gets more competitive, and the challenges to be addressed more complex, education has become the most powerful tool in providing solutions to various challenges (Semela, 2011). An effective and efficient quality higher education system is vital for sustainable economic development in developing countries like Ethiopia. Such a system, among others, improves the education and training of future employees, harnesses future leaders, fosters an enabling learning environment, and enriches the academic and intellectual landscape.

However, the process of establishing an effective quality higher education system is driven by a number of forces that demand a balanced approach. For instance, there is a need to strike a balance between the provision of equal access for education and the availability of finance needed to manage mass expansion of higher education, and between the pressure for increased institutional autonomy and those for growing public accountability. If a country fails to strike the right balance among the competing factors, then it ends up compromising

the quality of education. The focus on higher education in developing nations such as Ethiopia can bear fruit if education is delivered by emphasizing quality over quantity in the delivery of education (World Bank, 2009). The specific contributing factors to the level of quality of education include governance/ leadership, government oversight, students, instructors, funds, budget, and technology. Among these factors, governance/ leadership is considered as one of the major determinants of quality of education. Before introducing the situation of governance of higher education in Ethiopia, it is important to review some facts about higher education in Ethiopia in terms of physical expansion, student population, and status of quality.

For Ethiopia, modern higher education began in 1950 with the establishment of the University College of Addis Ababa, a government institution, which later became Haile Selassie I University and still later Addis Ababa University (Teshome, 1990). In 1991, the country had only two public

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universities and six colleges, with a capacity to enroll only about 10,000. By May 2014, the number of public universities reached 31 with enrollment capacity of more than 300,000. Meanwhile, prior to 1991, private higher education institutions (HEIs) did not exist in Ethiopia. Since 1992, 76 for-profit private HEIs (one university, three university colleges, 69 colleges, and three institutes) and three nonprofit private colleges have been founded (compiled by the author from various government publications).

The expansion of HEIs in Ethiopia brought about, as expected, a remarkable increase in student population. Between 1996 and 2003, the student population of the higher education system, including accredited private programs, increased from about 35,000 to more than 100,000. Eighteen percent of that total enrollment in 2003 came from private HEIs (Yizengaw, 2003). By 2010-2011, the total enrollment (undergraduate and graduate) of the HEIs (private and public) in all programs (regular, evening, summer, and distance education) was 467,843, of whom 79,314 or 17% were enrolled in private HEIs (Ministry of Education of Ethiopia [MoE], 2011). In the undergraduate program, where private HEIs are heavily involved, 21% of the enrollment was in private institutions (MoE, 2011). The total number of graduates from undergraduate and graduate programs for the 2010-2011 academic year was 81,598, of which 11,053 (14%) graduated from private HEIs.

The rapid expansion in the number of HEIs and student population, with inadequate human and investment capital to implement quality of education, is affecting higher education in Ethiopia. The education reform and expansion agenda of the Ethiopian government in the mid-1990s was so significant to some that it was feared that it would compromise the quality of education.

Although the pace of qualitative growth is a concern to many stakeholders on higher education, the rationales used by the government in driving the rapid expansion are “underpinned by strong ideological, political, and economic justifications that it [the government] believes to be vital for the survival and development of Ethiopia as a multicultural state” (Semela, 2011, p. 404).

As stated by a World Bank (2003) sector study on the development of higher education in Ethiopia, rapid enrollment expansion is inevitably bringing progressively less qualified student into the system. Negash (2006) identified that the “most fundamental cause for the decline of education is the uncontrolled expansion of the sector in relation to available material resources and job opportunities” (p. 35). Ethiopia is not alone in this problem. A World Bank (2009) report on human development in Sub-Saharan Africa found that public spending on education declined from 19.3% in 1990 to 18.2% in 2003, commenting that “the price of African education for its impressive (increased) enrollment has been a loss of educational quality” (p. 71).

When it comes to governance, the Ethiopian MoE, is the governing body of education in Ethiopia. Private HEIs

governance is closely monitored by the MoE through its legally organized agency, Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA). As stipulated in Articles 71 and 72 of the Higher Education Proclamation (HEP) No. 650/2009 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2009), private HEIs in Ethiopia are first accountable to the appropriate body as provided by its memorandum of association and bylaws. These governance instruments or documents must be approved by the appropriate governing agencies to secure permits. Second, private HEIs shall be accountable to the MoE with respect to propriety of operations in the delivery of education and research activities. Third, they must comply with directives issued by the MoE regarding student admission. Fourth, they must ensure that leadership and management capabilities, location, premises, facilities, campus environment, levels of studies, student and staff numbers, and the nature of the programs meet all government requirements. The HEP further requires private HEIs to have internal regulations that (a) stipulate the governing bodies of the institution, the decision-making procedures of academic bodies, the academic programs, the rights and obligations of the academic community, and the grievance handling procedures; (b) ensure that the institution has appropriate and functional internal regulations; and (c) ensure that the institution shall not contravene the provision of the proclamation or of any other applicable laws of the land.

Although private HEIs are controlled by HERQA, public HEIs are established by regulation of the Council of Ministers and hence are not required to be accredited by HERQA. Rather, HERQA, as stipulated in HEP, Articles 76 and 89, requires accreditation for private HEIs but mandates that HERQA's role with regard to public HEIs is limited to ensuring that those HEIs have an internal quality assurance system, conduct audits, and present recommendations for improvement. All private HEIs are required to obtain accreditation, renew accreditation, and submit to regular quality audits by HERQA. However, public HEIs are not required to go through HERQA's accreditation and reaccreditation process.

Despite efforts by Ethiopian MoE and HERQA to maintain high-quality education while implementing an aggressive higher education expansion program, poor-quality education throughout the system became an issue that caused all stakeholders—educators, business leaders, government leaders, and citizens—to call for action. The signs of poor quality in higher education were justified, among others, by (a) serious academic staff shortages with quality implications such as huge teaching loads eventually leading to discontinuation of tutorials and employment of unqualified personnel, (b) dissatisfaction of stakeholders with the quality of graduates which can be explained by large number of graduates who cannot be productive without being retrained to meet applied technical skill and communication skill requirements, and (c) nonresponsive governance lacking institutional management and strategic planning to maintain quality standards and set quality enhancement goals.

The Ethiopian Ministry of Education through HERQA conducts Institutional Quality Audits (IQAs) in HEIs across the country. Foremost among its findings, HERQA IQA cited the private HEIs' weak or dysfunctional governance and management systems as one of the major factors in poor-quality education in these institutions.

The purpose of this study was therefore to identify key factors that contribute to the decline or poor quality of education and factors that are attributable to governance in private HEIs in Ethiopia.

Literature Review

For private HEIs to advance and meet the demands of the 21st century and beyond, governance and quality assurance must be treated as complementary activities and crucial components that are essential in providing quality education in an environment filled with numerous dynamic challenges. Governance in higher education can be defined as the structure and process for college and university decision making at the institutional, system-wide, or state level (Forest & Kinser, 2002); Quality is conformance to mission specification and goal achievement within publicly accepted standards of accountability and integrity (Bogue & Hall, 2003).

The reviewed literature can be categorized into two scholarly perspectives of the relationship between governance and quality of higher education: (a) quality assurance as one of the major components of governance in higher education and governance as an important instrument to sustain quality in higher education, and (b) changes and environment that make governance of higher education problematic, thereby contributing to quality decline.

Quality Assurance and Governance

Academic scholars have addressed the role of governance in education quality assurance. According to Henard and Mitterle (2010), governance and quality assurance are closely entwined. Regulations of governance arrangements consist of internal self-regulating policies, as well as external instructions that focus on oversight, external audit, accreditation, like the ones exercised by HERQA in Ethiopia. However, wide-spread "quality guidance" is considered to be a self-regulation power due to the rather binding aspect and tendency to include governance issues. Jacob and Rust (2010) summarized four overarching themes: (a) institutional and social responsibilities; (b) tighter fiscal constraints and increased accountability; (c) establishment of four principles of good governance: coordination, information flow, transparency, and accountability; and (d) quality assurance, as a major component of governance in higher education. Jacob and Rust suggest that HEIs should ensure integration of quality assurance as an overarching theme of governance to satisfy the expectations of stakeholders.

Salmi (2009) indicated that "talent," "funds," and appropriate "governance" serve as "distinguishing characteristics"

of institutions that are considered to be high ranking. It was also indicated that successful institutions are known for "conducting leading-edge research" and having leaders with good "managerial skills" who can apply the vision of institutions with skill and knowledge (Salmi, 2009, p. 52).

According to Coats (2010), quality-focused leadership must be engaged with regulatory agencies, government, and others who are charged with monitoring quality of education. Monitoring standards and meeting the accreditation requirements play a major role in advancing quality education in any institution that seek to establish a center of excellence.

Materu (2007), in his assessment of the challenges in equality in higher education in Africa, stated that the dichotomy between political pressure by the government to expand access to institutions and the desire by the academy to maintain quality has not resulted in a healthy culture of quality. He identified major factors that derive the current efforts to strengthen quality assurance in higher education in Africa which include, among others, increased transparency and accountability in quality assurance system and retention of human capital. Materu identified poor governance as one of the main factors that have contributed to the decline in quality of higher education in Africa. Governance is a vital instrument to foster and sustain quality in higher education, along with funding and qualification of students and instructors (Henard & Mitterle, 2010).

The impact of regulation and political interference as a challenge to HEI governance cannot be taken lightly, especially in the politically dynamic and economically marginalized Sub-Saharan Africa. Bloom, Canning, and Chan (2005) explained the paradox that exists in education legislation in Africa, reflecting that "prevailing legislation often hamper[s] efforts to increase higher education enrollment and improve teaching quality in Africa" (p. 7). Highly centralized policies restrict autonomy of universities and politicize them, thereby "subverting the learning experience in response to political objectives" (Bloom et al., 2005, p. 7).

Telila (2010), in a review of recent literature on the factors affecting quality of education in Ethiopia, concluded that Ethiopia's educational expansion is plagued by the prevalence of poor quality across the education sector, from primary to tertiary education. According to Telila, Ethiopia's education system is in "deep crisis" due to problems associated with current education policy.

This study considered the effect of the existing quality assurance system as major component of governance in private HEIs. The review of regulations, policies, and political interferences provide an important framework for figuring out the impact of governance on the quality of education in private HEIs.

Changes and Environment That Make Governance Problematic

HEIs are usually confronted with dramatic changes mainly as a result of expansion of education, diversified modes of

delivery, and heterogeneity of students. Kezar and Eckel (2004) identified three significant changes in higher education delivery systems that have made governance problematic: (a) the need to respond to diverse environment issues, (b) weak mechanisms for faculty participation, and (c) the need to respond more efficiently based on shorter desired time frames. The authors argued that good governance requires approaches that focus on human dynamics, including human relation theories (how people work with the organization), cultural theories (focusing on values, beliefs, climate, and culture that affect institute operation), and social cognition theories (focusing on the learning process and understanding of the environment).

Mortimer and Sathre (2007) discussed the difficulty of governing a university in an environment where market and related external forces hold higher education accountable for results rather than for process. They say “politically savvy,” “market smart,” and “mission-centered” leaders must use the art of governance to pilot their institutions safely through the jungle of competing interests.

Educators must make a paradigm shift to deal with the challenge of leading HEIs that are subjected to unavoidable rapid externally imposed changes. Effective leadership and management are essential if schools and colleges are to achieve the wide-ranging objectives set for them by their many stakeholders, notably the governments that provide most of the funding for public educational institutions (Bush, 2003).

This study also considered the analysis of changes and working environment as an important instrument for understanding the difficulty of governing private HEIs, thereby resulting in a decline of quality of education. Based on the above facts, I focused on four aspects of quality and governance to meet the purpose of the study: (a) current situation of quality of higher education, (b) key factors that determine the quality of higher education, (c) the role of institutional leadership or governance in providing quality education, and (d) the contribution of the governing bodies to quality education.

Research Methods

This case study used qualitative techniques to produce insight into the problem of the declining or poor quality of education and identify quality challenges attributable to governance in private HEIs in Ethiopia. Private interviews were the principal data collection method for the study, augmented by document review, field notes, and observation. I was a “participant observer,” acting as sole interviewer, information collector, data analyst, and author.

Sample

The sampling technique for this case study was purposive, not random, because the goal of the study was to acquire the best-positioned and the most able thinkers on the problem. Six

private HEIs engaged in the delivery of education for-profit were selected for this study based on their relatively higher enrollments, ownership structures, organizational modes and strengths, and modes of educational service delivery.

Each of the six selected institutions was asked to contribute four individual participants (president, vice president, and two administration staff members). In the end, four participants were interviewed from each of five institutions, but only two from the sixth institution (due to lack of availability). Thus, there were 22 participants.

Interview

Interview questions were “unstructured, informal, flexible, explanatory, more like conversation” to produce a relaxed environment for participants (Merriam, 2009, p. 2). The interview questions were designed to generate relevant data on declining or poor quality of education, identify quality challenges attributable to governance, and indicate possible remedies to help resolve the identified problems that threaten the quality of private higher education in Ethiopia.

Document Review

Although interviews were the prime source of data, observations and document review were used to supplement the interviews and put responses by participants into perspective. Documents related to each institution’s Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) were reviewed to see the extent of their autonomy (whom they reported to) and activities (had they conducted quality assurance reviews as mandated). The recent IQA reports by HERQA on the six selected institutions were reviewed, with a focus on the *essential* recommendations that require immediate action.

Relevant government proclamations were also reviewed, limited to the prime point of contention between the private sector and MoE and HERQA, that is, the differentiation between regulation of private and public institutions and the impact of that differentiation on delivery of quality education.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included a review of (a) all interviews, (b) documents related to each institution’s governance structure as it relates to quality functions, (c) documents of HERQA on IQA, (d) government proclamations on higher education, and (e) the researcher’s field notes and observations. All of these data were arranged into categories or themes, with the analysis process using methods introduced by researchers, including Creswell (2008), Gay (1996), and McMillan and Schumacher (2001).

The interview recordings were transcribed, categorized, and reviewed to “make meaning” from the data in the manner indicated by Merriam (2009). A search for categories, patterns, and themes that would facilitate a coherent synthesis of

the data was conducted (Gay, 1996; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The transcripts of the interviews were reviewed and categorized to facilitate coding; shorthand designations were assigned to various aspects of the data for easy retrieval (Merriam, 2009). The responses were placed in tabulations and charts to organize key elements of the responses for descriptive statistical analysis to reach sound conclusions, classifying and categorizing emerging patterns and evaluating percentages or proportions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). Comparison of results across participants, across institutions, and within institutions was used to evaluate the results from different perspectives. The meanings of the findings from the researcher's perspective are also indicated as appropriate for understanding the issues (Creswell, 2008; Gay, 1996), although competing interpretations are noted.

Findings

The results of this study are summarized under the following four broad aspects of quality and governance, as indicated in the framework section, focusing on private higher education in Ethiopia: (a) current situation of quality of higher education, (b) key factors that determine the quality of higher education, (c) the role of institutional leadership or governance in providing quality education, and (d) the contribution of the governing bodies to quality education.

Current Situation of Quality of Higher Education

The assessment of the prevailing situation of the quality of higher education was mainly based on the responses of study participants to five relevant questions designed to observe the current status of quality. Participants were asked to reflect on (a) stakeholders' satisfaction; (b) challenges related to infrastructure and resource; (c) the existence and role of internal quality assessment unit; (d) input-, process-, and output-related challenges; and (e) general quality of higher education in the country. The main results of the study that are related to the current status of quality of higher education are presented below.

There were not adequate tracer studies (retrospective analyses taking a sample of students and looking at the impact of the education experience on their lives) in the six participating HEIs. However, participants were asked to describe feedback from students, employers, and parents. The result of the analysis indicated 78% stakeholder satisfaction, whereas the remaining 22% indicated stakeholder dissatisfaction. This positive result (large percentage of stakeholder satisfaction) seems to go against the prevailing information in the academic literature and popular media on dissatisfaction with quality and with new graduates in general (and possibly private HEI graduates in particular). In light of participants' own interest in their response, I regard this result as a finding that should be interpreted with caution.

Responses related to infrastructure and resource challenges were grouped into five categories: finance, human resources, facility, infrastructure, and other. Almost all of the institutions reported shortages of resources, either financial or human. The results of the analysis indicated that some institutions attempted to diversify their income-generating techniques by focusing on cost reduction and securing financing from alternative sources to supplement revenue from tuition. Some participants explained their institution's effort to overcome the shortage of human resource by (a) sending instructors (as students) for higher education at their own expense, (b) providing in-house training, (c) developing partnerships with other institutions, and (d) hiring instructors on a contract basis. Better use of technology, introduction of e-books, purchase of material at reduced prices, constructing buildings, and acquiring more space and standby generators were other actions mentioned by some of the institutions. However, the interviews and field notes revealed that only two of the six participating institutions actually attempted to overcome challenges via the actions described above. It is clear from the responses that these constant or structural shortages constitute a major constraint on the overall performance and delivery of quality education by the private HEIs.

The analysis of responses obtained to the question related to internal QAU indicated that (a) all six institutions had QAUs as part of their organizational structure; (b) the units had been established since 2006; (c) the functions of the units were supported by legislation, policies, and procedures; (d) the units were administered by assigned leaders, mostly reporting to the president of the institution; (e) QAUs play a major role in addressing quality issues and have served as contact points for HERQA; and (f) the QAU at all but one institution were *semiautonomous* (as opposed to the preferred *autonomous*) in exercising responsibilities. For the purpose of this study, QAUs that were managed as part of another department or section in an institution, and units that did not directly report to the presidents (reporting to the vice presidents instead), were categorized as "semiautonomous."

Observations during the interviews and document review of the six IQA reports conducted by HERQA indicated that QAUs may not be performing as expected by their mandates and internal regulations for two main reasons. First, all units at the participating institutions had been in operation for less than a decade and came into existence only as a result of the minimum requirement set by HERQA for accreditation of programs of private HEIs. Second, five of the six were semi-autonomous, in contrast to HERQA's expectations as indicated in the IQA reports. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that these units are operating up to the expectations of stakeholders regarding ensuring the quality of education.

Participants were also asked to describe quality-related challenges that are associated with the input (admission), the process (teaching and learning), and output (graduates). The results indicated that the behavior of students (quality, language proficiency, resistance to active learning, absenteeism,

lack of interest to learn, poor communication, etc.) was a major factor (cited by 32% of the respondents). Negative behaviors and attributes of instructors (low level of qualifications, availability, extensive use of part-time teaching, dedication, skill, pedagogy, cooperation, moonlighting, etc.) was the second-rated quality problem (23%). Likewise, challenges associated with institutions (16%), government (16%), and employers (13%) were expressed.

Institutional factors mentioned included shortage of funds, shortage of incoming students, ineffective student admission practices, hiring of unqualified instructors, inadequate placement policy, lack of qualified instructors, extensive use of remedial (makeup) classes, low salaries, and relaxed grading systems.

Challenges associated with government included high frequency of policy changes and unattainable requirement regarding the number of instructors and high frequency of changes in admission criteria. The main challenge related to employers was their resistance to allowing students to have internships.

Output-related challenges such as poor communication skills, lack of entrepreneurship by students, lack of career development training, unsatisfactory focus on apprenticeship by institutions, and employers' negative perceptions of graduates from private HEIs were expressed by participants as affecting the quality of education and performance by private HEIs.

In light of assessing the current situation of higher education quality, in the last question, respondents were asked to characterize the current quality of higher education in the country, based on their experience, as *excellent*, *poor*, *improving*, or *declining*. Just under half of the responses (45%) indicated that the overall status of quality of education is "improving," whereas 36.3% and 18.2% indicated that the status is "declining" and "poor," respectively. No participant rated quality of education in the country as "excellent."

Reasons mentioned in support of the *improving* rating included the following: (a) higher education expansion is good, it indicates more people understanding the benefits of higher education; (b) there is awareness by all stakeholders that quality has improved; (c) more commitment and focus on higher education has been demonstrated by government; (d) educational infrastructure is improving at various private and public HEIs; (e) students are better qualified; (f) private HEIs are focused and committed to delivering quality; and (g) HERQA's attitude toward private HEIs is improving.

However, as shown above, over half of the responses (54.5%) indicated a combination of "poor" and "declining" as the current status of the quality of education in the country. These results indicate a very serious situation regarding the general quality of higher education in both private and public HEIs.

Reasons noted in support of the *declining* rating included (a) poor usage of communication medium (English), (b) quality of students declining, (c) government's focus on

expansion (quantity) instead of quality, (d) lack of commitment to quality by all stakeholders (public, business, private citizens, higher institutions, etc.), (e) less commitment by instructors, (f) cumbersome management systems in public institutions, (g) increased access without the essential facilities or infrastructure, (h) excessive social promotion (allowing unqualified students to go through the system despite poor performance), (i) expansion of institutions without considering impact on quality, (j) students not being serious about education, (k) shortage of qualified instructors, and (l) poor infrastructure and resources (teaching and learning instruments, buildings, fund, etc.).

Reasons offered in support of the *poor* rating included (a) increased access to all universities without adequate academic staff (i.e., qualification, availability) and (b) inadequate infrastructure (i.e., roads, buildings).

Most interview participants felt that poor and declining quality is primarily due to matters outside of administrators' direct control. They regarded the state of private HEI educational quality largely as the perhaps-inevitable by-product of a fragile national system of tertiary education that is expanding faster than the infrastructure can support. Indeed, to keep up with the public's and the country's demands for an educational system that could meet the nation's development needs, the participants (and others in government with whom I spoke) returned again and again to the question of overexpansion, which they saw as plaguing Ethiopian higher education. This position is well documented in the international literature, which describes the economic, political, and societal costs that occur as a result of misaligned growth among primary, secondary, and tertiary educational systems and a nation's inability to scale the growth rapidly at various levels of the system as they climb to developed status.

As the study results show, there are reasons for either rating. However, the preponderant findings regarding a declining quality of education confirm the conclusions of Yizengaw (2004), Saint (2004), Desta (2004), and other scholars concerning the deteriorating quality of education in the country.

Key Factors That Determine the Quality of Higher Education

Respondents were asked to describe the key factors that determine the quality of education provided at their institutions. The analysis of the responses of the participants revealed 10 key *individual* factors: (a) teaching and learning process; (b) organizational structure, policy, and procedure; (c) management services; (d) attributes related to instructors; (e) attributes related to students; (f) leadership; (g) resources; (h) faculty; (i) administrative staff; and (j) infrastructure. Of these "individual" factors, teaching and learning had the highest frequency of citation (17.2%), followed by activities related to "organizational structure, policy, procedure" (16.2%).

In examining how participants connected these individual factors in their responses, it was clear that there was

substantial agreement among the interviewees regarding the broad categories associated with the factors. Thus, I organized “combined” categories under the following three metaphors.

1. *Hardware*: Those “individual” factors related to resources (finance, capital), infrastructure (campus, transportation), and facilities (teaching and learning items, computers, chalkboards).
2. *Software*: This category contained “combined” factors consisting of “individual” factors related to instructors, students, and administrators, combined under the metaphor *software* because they represent animate, human (people) inputs in the system.
3. *Glue*: This category contained “combined” factors related to the “individual” factors of leadership, management services, and institutional organizational processes; these provide the necessary relationships or connections via operational leadership and guidance to make the *hardware* and *software* work properly together for the system.

When the 10 individual factors were grouped into the three categories, results revealed that the combined factors associated with management, leadership, and organizational activities (the glue) contributed the greatest share (55%) of factors that determine the quality of education. This finding suggests that management and leadership activities at private HEIs are of paramount importance in determining the quality of education.

The Role of Institutional Leadership or Governance in Providing Quality Higher Education

To assess the role of leadership and governance, participants were asked to address (a) the role of institutional leadership, or governance, with respect to quality of services offered, and the quality of graduates produced by HEIs, and (b) the obstacles or constraints within the leadership (governance) at their institutions that could affect quality.

The transcribed responses related to leadership’s role were grouped into three categories, in order of frequency: (a) leadership’s role in management and leadership activities (80% of responses), (b) leadership’s role in teaching and learning activities (15% of responses), and (c) leadership’s role in resources, infrastructure, and facility (5% of responses).

From the perspective of those in private HEIs, the idea that management and leadership activities play a greater role was widely shared. Furthermore, within the four factors grouped under one category (leadership, management services, organizational structures and policies, administration and staff), the leadership factor was agreed to be the dominant factor with respect to the quality of services and graduates offered by the institutions. This assessment by the participants indicated a high degree of agreement, in principle at least, regarding the need for an intense focus on

leadership or governance by the top executives in charge of the institution.

Comparing these responses with those of the Top-Ten focus areas developed by HERQA, the management and leadership function in private HEIs was the most important activity, followed by activities related to teaching and learning, and then activities related to management of resources and infrastructure. These findings suggest agreement by HERQA as well as interview participants that the importance of the management and leadership role is paramount.

The participants revealed that internal obstacles and constraints came basically from three major areas. The first group of obstacles and constraints, related to management activities, included lack of qualified personnel in leadership, high staff turnover, lack of autonomy by QAUs, owner and stakeholder interference, leadership commitment limitations, poor performance, and lack of decision-making skill. The second area of obstacles or constraints was related to the working culture, including absenteeism or tardiness, moonlighting by instructors, corrupt practices, lack of dedication or commitment by major players in the teaching and learning process, extensive use of makeup classes, poor utilization of time, and a chalk-and-talk culture of instruction. The third area of obstacles or constraints included shortage of funds, inadequate compensation to attract qualified instructors and administrators, and inadequate number of instructors in the market.

Contribution of Governing Bodies to Quality of Higher Education

The review of the contribution of governing bodies (MoE and HERQA) to the quality of higher education was based on the reflection of study participants on the following three questions. Participants were asked to describe (a) HERQA’s contribution as well as the contribution of HEP 650/2009 to the quality of education in private HEIs, (b) the challenges that could be lessened or eliminated if certain support were made available, and (c) the adequacy of the infrastructure of their institutions to meet the requirements of the governing or accrediting body. The results are summarized below.

All 22 participants acknowledged the positive contributions of HERQA to promote quality of education through accreditation, reaccreditation, monitoring, auditing, and other support activities. However, only 23% agreed that the HEP (650/2009) had positive elements that promote quality of education in private HEIs. It is interesting that three fourths of the respondents opted not to respond concerning the impact of the HEP.

In an effort to measure the impact of HERQA’s requirements, a follow-up question was asked: “Given HERQA’s mandate/responsibility, what do you see as the challenges that private HEIs or their leadership faces with regard to quality of education?”

The results showed that 20 of 22 participants (91%) expressed, with great passion and frustration, that the requirements set by HERQA have created serious challenges to their operations. The main challenges indicated by the participants were common for all institutions and include (a) excessive requirements, specifically with regard to resources, that were not in tune with market reality, (b) lack of consistent HERQA enforcement of the law, and (c) differential treatment between private and public institutions with regard to student placement policies, joint employment of instructors, availability of land, and duty-free privileges. It is important to note that the need for quality education (as required by the HEP, HERQA, and external stakeholders), on one hand, and the constraints, obstacles, or challenges created by HERQA and the HEP, on the other hand, have created a serious challenge to the leadership in private HEIs.

In an independent assessment of HERQA's impact, a document review of IQA reports of the six participating institutions revealed 808 commendations and recommendations (essential, advisable, or desirable) for the six audited institutions. Although there was repetition of some elements, 253 of the 808 (31%) elements of input provided by HERQA could be considered as commendations, while the majority (69%) were recommendations that the institutions carry out to meet HERQA's requirements. Of the total 808 elements, 32% were in the category of *essential* recommendations that called for *urgent* compliance by the audited private HEIs.

The IQA data also revealed that, despite the availability of QAUs within each HEI, HERQA auditors felt that performance by the institutions was inadequate to meet minimum requirements set by HERQA. These IQA documents served as valuable external data regarding the governance of quality of education in private HEIs.

Seven top items were identified as prominent suggestions to lessen the burden imposed by the requirements set by the government and HERQA on private HEIs. "Providing access for PhD training" and "allowing joint employment" at private HEIs were the dominant desired support, indicating the difficulties that private HEIs face in acquiring or competing for qualified instructors. Participants generally saw this phenomenon as playing a major role in the delivery of quality higher education services by the private HEIs.

The full suggestions to the government to lessen the burden that private HEIs face can be categorized as follows:

1. Provide full access for instructors in private HEIs to attend PhD classes at government institutions—the only ones available in the country (16%).
2. Allow joint employment of instructors for private HEIs so these institutions can employ instructors from both private and public HEIs (13%).
3. Allow relevant duty-free privileges for private HEIs (11%).
4. Facilitate availability of land for private HEIs (10%).

5. Eliminate differential treatment between public and private HEIs (8%).
6. Make the student placement policy inclusive of private HEIs (6%).
7. Allow access to common facilities, such as libraries and laboratories, by all private HEIs (5%).

When the data were organized into broader categories—(a) items related to government policies and procedures and (b) items related to enhancing the financial situation at private HEIs—the following pattern emerged: 54 of 83 responses (64%) were related to challenges resulting from requirements imposed by the proclamations, policies, and procedures of MoE and HERQA, and 29 responses (36%) were challenges that have created a burden on the financial and budgetary activities of the private HEIs.

A comparison of a document review of relevant articles in the HEP 650/2009 and HERQA 2012 Regulation with responses to the interview questions related to governing bodies confirmed the dichotomy of treatment between private and public institutions. This dichotomy was directly related to provisions relevant to performance of institutions and delivery of quality education, including (a) legal establishment of institutions of higher education, (b) academic programs, (c) academic staff development, (d) joint appointment of instructors, (e) student admissions, and (f) funds and subsidies. The findings indicated that the differential treatments employed by the government negatively affect the uniform delivery of quality education by all HEIs in the country.

Participant responses regarding the adequacy of institutional infrastructure to meet MoE's and HERQA's requirements indicated that 77% of the participants reported that their infrastructure met HERQA's minimum requirements. However, when participants were asked a follow-up question as to whether they agreed that "meeting HERQA's minimum requirements is sufficient to meet the delivery of quality of education in private HEIs," 36% of the participants stated that meeting requirements alone does not guarantee quality of education, which depends mainly on other factors, such as commitment of staff and readiness of students. Participant responses also showed that 23% of the participants stated that the infrastructure of their institution was *not* adequate to meet HERQA's minimum requirement. The changes advised by the participants included cost reduction, securing finances from alternative sources, and introduction of e-books.

To test the relationship of the above results with IQA reports issued by HERQA, the reports for the six participating institutions were reviewed, taking only the *essential* recommendations focused on quality assurance as the sample for evaluation. This exercise indicated that HERQA's *essential* recommendations for "urgent" action included items such as development of quality assurance policy, organizational structure, procedures, practices, guidelines, systems, and training. The HERQA recommendation signaled the

weakness of institutions in dealing with the quality requirements set by HERQA. This result, when compared with responses to the question related to the adequacy of infrastructure, confirms the earlier assertion that the institutions are not adequately organized to meet the minimum requirements set by HERQA in the Top-Ten focus areas.

Discussion

In this section, the main findings reported in the previous section will be discussed. Following the four broad aspects of *quality and governance*, the discussion addresses the contribution of the findings as compared with the existing literature.

Current Situation of Quality of Higher Education

The assessment of the prevailing situation of the quality of higher education indicated 78% stakeholder satisfaction, while the remaining 22% indicated stakeholder dissatisfaction. This positive result (large percentage of stakeholder satisfaction) seems to go against the prevailing information in the academic literature and popular media on dissatisfaction with quality and with new graduates in general (and possibly private HEI graduates in particular). In light of participants' own interest in their response, I regard this result as a finding that should be interpreted with caution.

The behavior of students (quality, language proficiency, resistance to active learning, absenteeism, lack of interest to learn, poor communication, etc.) was found to be a major factor related to input challenges. The literature, similar to the results of this study, indicates that the preparedness of students entering many private HEIs in Africa is generally poor (Materu, 2007), contributing to poor-quality outcomes.

Institutional factors mentioned as quality challenges included shortage of funds, shortage of incoming students, ineffective student admission practices, hiring of unqualified instructors, inadequate placement policy, lack of qualified instructors, extensive use of remedial (makeup) classes, low salaries, and relaxed grading systems. The results related to infrastructure and resource challenges clearly indicated that constant or structural shortages constitute a major constraint on the overall performance and delivery of quality education by the private HEIs. Scholars have also indicated that in Ethiopia, the rapid expansion in tertiary education, the mass enrollment of less qualified students in the higher education system (World Bank, 2003), poor perceptions of candidates graduating from secondary schools, and large class sizes due to limitations in resources (Yizengaw, 2004) have intensified the challenges to educational quality.

In light of assessing the current situation of higher education quality, just under half of the responses (45%) indicated that the overall status of quality of education is "improving," whereas 36.3% and 18.2% indicated that the status is "declining" and "poor," respectively. This shows that over half of

the responses (54.5%) indicated a combination of "poor" and "declining" as the current status of the quality of education in the country. The results support the argument that the concern about the quality of higher education is real, not perceived, and hence requires serious attention by all stakeholders. Rapid expansion along with inadequate infrastructure and resources are among the key reasons for the concerns expressed by educators about the status of the quality of education in Ethiopia. As the study results show, there are reasons for either rating. However, the preponderant findings regarding a declining quality of education confirm the conclusions of Yizengaw (2004), Saint (2004), Desta (2004), and World Bank (2003) concerning the deteriorating quality of education in the country.

Key Factors That Determine the Quality of Higher Education

In analyzing key *individual* factors that determine quality of higher education, combined categories were organized under three metaphors: (a) *hardware*, (b) *software*, and (c) *glue*. The results revealed that the combined factors associated with management, leadership, and organizational activities (the glue) contributed the greatest share (55%) of factors that determine the quality of education. This finding suggests that management and leadership activities at private HEIs are of paramount importance in determining the quality of education. This result is in line with the reviewed literature (e.g., Fullan, 1993; Kahsay, 2012).

The Role of Institutional Leadership or Governance in Providing Quality Higher Education

To assess the role of leadership and governance, observations were grouped into three categories: (a) leadership's role in management and leadership activities, (b) leadership's role in teaching and learning activities, and (c) leadership's role in resources, infrastructure, and facility. It was observed that 80% of the responses supported leadership's role in management and leadership activities.

Comparing this result with those of the Top-Ten focus areas developed by HERQA, the management and leadership function in private HEIs was the most important activity, followed by activities related to teaching and learning, and then activities related to management of resources and infrastructure. These findings suggest agreement by HERQA as well as interview participants that the importance of the management and leadership role is paramount.

These results are consistent with the literature (Coats, 2010; Kahsay, 2012; Salmi, 2009; Schwahn & Spady, 1998).

The analysis revealed that internal obstacles and constraints came basically from three major areas: (a) management related activities, (b) constraints related to the working culture, and (c) challenges related to shortage of funds, inadequate compensation to attract qualified instructors and

administrators, and inadequate number of instructors in the market. Similar obstacles and constraints were indicated in the reviewed literature (Codling & Meek, 2006; Schwahn & Spady, 1998).

Contribution of Governing Bodies to Quality of Higher Education

Observations on the contribution of governing bodies (MoE and HERQA) to the quality of higher education showed, as supported by all respondents, a positive contribution of HERQA to promote quality of education through accreditation, reaccreditation, monitoring, auditing, and other support activities. Similar observation was reported, for instance, by Coats (2010). However, most of the participants (91%) expressed, with great passion and frustration, that the requirements set by HERQA have created serious challenges to their operations.

As stated earlier in this article, comparison of a document review of relevant articles in the HEP 650/2009 and HERQA 2012 Regulation with responses to the interview questions related to governing bodies confirmed the dichotomy of treatment between private and public institutions. The findings indicated that the differential treatments employed by the government negatively affect the uniform delivery of quality education by all HEIs in the country. High frequency of changes in policy and regulations was also indicated as one of the main problems. The results of this study are consistent with the reviewed literature indicating that government policies on education may sometimes include restrictive, controlling, and cumbersome regulations and procedures with unclear, subjective criteria and standards (Bloom et al., 2005; Telila, 2010; World Bank, 2009).

Conclusion

The fact that some of the study participants who were owners or stakeholders of the participated institutions were business professionals with no or limited exposure to the governance of academic institutions could be considered as a limitation of the study. Also, a negative bias against the government and its MoE and HERQA, potentially present in some participants, could have biased the results of the study. The following conclusion is presented with due recognition of the stated limitations.

Higher education in Ethiopia was considered by participants as essential for the growth and development of the country. The importance of quality in the delivery of higher education was recognized by all participants. However, participants strongly indicated that rapid expansion for the sake of opening access, despite inadequate infrastructure and resources, could negatively affect the quality of education in the country. In the view of participants, poor or declining academic quality in higher education is likely not a misperception by the public or the media but a real phenomenon currently

occurring in HEIs in Ethiopia and, therefore, it should be a real concern both for the institutions involved and for the nation.

Among the three categories (software, hardware, and glue) of key individual factors, the combined factors associated with management, leadership, and organizational activities (the glue) are of paramount importance in determining the quality of education.

The results of the assessment made on the role of leadership and governance in determining education quality in private HEIs indicate that leadership's role in management and leadership activities is relatively high as compared with its role in teaching and learning activities, and resources, infrastructure, and facility.

Students' behaviors and attributes, such as poor communication skill, resistance to active learning, and absenteeism, were seen as major challenges to internal leadership. Another serious challenge was associated with negative behavior and attributes of instructors, such as low level of academic qualification, lack of dedication, excessive moonlighting, and lack of pedagogical skills.

There was a general consensus among participants that HERQA's contributions to enhancing quality of education through accreditation, reaccreditation, and monitoring, auditing, and extending support have been positive. However, the agency's capacity to deliver necessary support and services was strongly questioned.

There is evidence in the pattern of HERQA IQA enforcement that private HEIs and HERQA share common ground on the matter of overexpansion being a problem, not that the private HEIs were the primary source of the nation's higher education quality problem. The disagreement between government agencies and private HEIs was focused primarily on the extent of the responsibility of private HEIs to be leaders in addressing the quality problems in the nation's HEIs.

The government's HEP of 2009 (HEP 650/2009) has elements that are useful to promotion of the quality of education. However, it also contains dichotomous treatment of private institutions in contrast to public HEIs, and this differential treatment was shown by the study's participants to have a disproportionately negative impact on private HEIs.

The infrastructure and resources employed by private HEIs may be marginally adequate to meet the minimum standards set by HERQA but are often not sufficient to enhance quality of education.

The expected leadership and governance structures are present in the participating private HEIs. Their role in preserving educational quality was well understood and relied on by a substantial majority of the executive administrators interviewed. Findings of the IQAs and statements of private HEI participants agreed that weak governance structures existed to a greater or lesser extent in private HEIs, and that such structures reduce quality and should be remedied.

Overall, the data lead to the conclusion that, whatever the magnitude of the education quality problem, governance in

the private HEIs is just one of the forces driving the very real problem of poor or declining quality in higher education.

This study adds to the substantial body of literature expressing concerns about the maintenance of quality of education, given demands for expansion coupled with limited resources. Leaders of private HEIs in Ethiopia undoubtedly face daunting challenges at this point in the life of their institutions, but the recommendations provided here lay out a pathway toward a better future.

Recommendations

1. Leaders of private HEIs should conduct periodic follow-up tracer studies to assess the level of satisfaction of their stakeholders (employers, parents, alumni, etc.) with the quality of their institution's graduates. Such assessments can guide their QAUs and lead to appropriate interventions.
2. As part of their professional responsibility, private HEI leaders should publicly avow that they are committed to balancing resources and stakeholder demands without compromise to educational quality.
3. To reconcile the competing imperatives of profit and the public good, the leadership of private for-profit HEIs should identify and address the root causes of the weak academic culture that tend to affect their institutions' educational quality negatively.
4. To enhance regard for the higher education sector and to avoid imposition of more rigorous regulations, the autonomy of the QAUs should receive tangible public recognition and support from private HEI owners, decision makers, managers, and staff—including complete autonomy and proper funding.
5. The government, MoE, and HERQA should engage in a good faith reassessment of their rationale for the present differences in treatment between public and private HEIs, strive to identify the weaknesses in the relationships, and work to improve the situation. A regulatory structure that is seen as fair and equitable by all who operate under its administration will enhance the level of participation and commitment by all of the institutions served.
6. Given the difficulty of private HEIs in finding and retaining qualified instructors, the government and MoE should reexamine lifting the directive that prohibits private HEIs from providing education in teacher training. Such action would permit private HEIs to develop the internal capacity to satisfy their own needs for qualified instructors.

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