



Quality: A Many-Headed Hydra? Quality Perception in the Eyes of Different Stakeholders

by
Philip Rayner (PhD) & Tesfaye Teshome (PhD)

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Quality: A Many-Headed Hydra? Quality Perception in the Eyes of Different Stakeholders

Philip Rayner (PhD)¹ & Tesfaye Teshome (PhD)²

Abstract

Ethiopia is in the process of establishing an organization to report on the quality of Higher Education, both public and private. The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) have recently moved into new offices. It has established a Board that meets regularly, has appointed a Director, and is training recently appointed expert and support staff. It will start to undertake its duties at the start of the 1998 (EC) Academic Year.

The Ethiopian Higher Education sector that HERQA is to report on is in the process of a rapid growth of public universities from only two, a few years ago, to eight in 2005. Recently the Government announced the establishment of another thirteen new universities, plus an open university. A few years ago there were less than six accredited or pre-accredited private Colleges and Universities. Today the number is more than seventy for the diploma and 34 for the degree programmes. All the PHEIs currently enroll over 39,000 students which are 23% of the total National Enrolment in Higher Education. At the last year's conference, HE the Minister of Education announced that in the past five years, students from private HEIs account for the 40% of the total enrolment in Higher Education.

Nearly all those involved in the Higher Education system recognize the crucial role the agency HERQA will play in the maintenance and assessment of the quality of education offered. However, there is one question that is only just recently started to be asked, "What is quality?" And its subsidiary question, "What does quality look like in the Ethiopian context?" Consultation is recognized as being a key component in the process of defining and understanding what quality is. However, one question is, "Consultation with whom?" The list of possible stakeholders in the Higher Education process is a long one: the Government employers, the students, the parents and the HEIs themselves (both managers and faculty), donors and probably others.

Based on the research undertaken in 2004 on Higher Education System Overhaul (HESO) and in 2005 for HERQA and the Higher Education Strategy Centre (HSC) plus relevant literature, this paper will explore in more detail what is it that the various stakeholders in the Ethiopian Higher Education sector may expect or demand from

¹ Vice Director, the Ethiopian Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency, and a VSO Management Advisor, and

² Director of the Ethiopian Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency and was until recently Academic Vice President of Debu University

Higher Education and how their particular agendas and perspectives will influence their own individual notions of what is meant by quality.

The paper will also explore what 'quality' means in an expanding and the growth of 'massif' Higher Education system and the lessons for the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency. This paper will suggest that it is perhaps unrealistic to expect all the stakeholders in Higher Education to agree and share a common definition of 'quality' except in its very broadest sense. However, for HERQA to ensure quality standard, it needs the support and cooperation of all the other stakeholders in Ethiopian Higher Education. 'Quality' cannot be achieved in isolation and it cannot be imposed from above. It has to be a communal effort. Eventually all of those involved in the Higher Education Sector, both private and public, will need to work together to ensure that we are all 'doing the right things in the right way'

Introduction

Perhaps the Hydra is not a comfortable or reassuring metaphor to use for quality in Higher Education. As in Greek mythology, the Hydra was a malevolent snake with many heads that grew again and again when cut off. The Hydra was seen as a monster whose individual heads could main or kill but also as a monster that was made up or more than the sum of its parts and was very dangerous.

Ethiopia is in the process of establishing an organisation to report on the quality of Higher Education, both public and private. The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency was established as a result of the 2003 Higher Education Proclamation (351/2003) and the Agency has recently moved into new offices. It has also established a Board that meets regularly, appointed a Director and is training the appointed expert and support staff. The Agency will start to undertake its duties at the start of the 1998 (EC) Academic Year.

The Ethiopian Higher Education sector that HERQA is to report on is in the process of a rapid 'massif' growth that has seen the number of universities increase from only two a few years ago to nine in 2005. Recently, the Government announced the establishment of another thirteen new universities, plus an 'open' university. A few years ago, there were

less than six accredited private colleges and universities. Today, the number is more than seventy for diploma and thirty four for degree programmes³

The intake capacity of undergraduate degree programmes in public HEIs has increased from 3,000 ten years ago (1994/5) for both diploma and degree students in HEIs to 31,921 in degree programs alone in 2004/05. The total enrolment has increased from 42,132 to over 172,000 in the same period.⁴ Private HEIs are encouraged to expand to assist the Government in meeting its targets. Private HEIs currently enroll over 39,000 students: 23% of the total National enrolment in Higher Education.⁵ At this conference last year HE the Minister of Education announced that within the next five years students from private HEIs should account for between 40-50% of the total enrolment in Higher Education.⁶ This expansion of market share is happening at the same time as total student numbers within Higher Education are set to double. Therefore the combined effect of this projected growth in total student numbers and the increase in the private sector's share would mean a quadrupling of the numbers of enrolments of students in private HEIs over the next five years.

Nearly all those involved in the Higher Education system recognize the crucial role that an agency such as HERQA will play in the maintenance and assessment of the quality of education offered at a time of such a rapid and substantial expansion. However, there is one question that is only just starting to be asked: "What is quality?" and its subsidiary question "What does quality look like in the Ethiopian context?"

Consultation is recognized as being a key component of the process of defining and understanding what 'quality' is, however, one question is, "Consultation with whom?" The list of possible stakeholders in the Higher Education process is a long one: The

³ ESDP III p8

⁴ Ethiopian Higher Education Sector Capacity Building Strategy for 1998-2002. However this is still only a gross enrolment ratio (GER) of 1.5% for Ethiopia in comparison with the Sub-Saharan average of 3%.

⁵ ESDP-III p.8

⁶ Keynote speech 2nd National Conference on Private Higher Education in Ethiopia, July 2004, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Government, employers, students, parents, HEIs themselves (both managers and faculty), donors and probably others. Based on research undertaken in 2004 for the Higher Education System Overhaul (HESO) and in 2005 for HERQA and the Higher Education Strategy Centre (HESC) plus relevant literature, this paper will explore in more detail what it is these various stakeholders expect or demand from Higher Education and how their particular agendas and perspectives will influence their own individual notions of what is meant by ‘quality’.

Government

According to ESDP III, the major goals of Higher Education in Ethiopia are:

- To develop responsible and competent citizens who meet the quantities and qualitative demand for a high-level trained labor force based on the socio-economic development needs of the country.
- To ensure democratic management and governance in Higher Education system.
- To set up cost effective, efficient and result-oriented system in order to develop an appropriate range of modern and effective human resources management and resource practices and procedures.
- To develop the volume, quality and relevance of research and consultancy services which are necessarily directed to the needs of the country.⁷

Governments when funding Higher education, like students and employers, talk about ‘value for money’ and ‘fitness for purpose’. They will want to be reassured that every birr that is spent on Higher Education in Ethiopia is well spent and that it is being used to its maximum good. This can mean that there is pressure put on HEIs by the Government or the Ministry of Education to ask both public and private institutions to produce the maximum number of graduates of the highest quality but at the lowest possible cost.

Government is in a strong position to impose this mandate. For public institutions it provides the major part of their funding and can reward or punish HEIs, for example by

⁷ ESDP-IIIp.23

refusing to fund certain programmes or by adjusting or adding additional incentives⁸ depending on the extent that public HEIs are seen to meet Government demands. Government's influence over the direction and value of the private sector is achieved less directly through the Ministry of Education's accreditation process,⁹ private HEIs are given or refused a 'license'. The Government can also encourage or discourage the expansion of the private sector through a variety of other instruments such as import duty on books and other teaching materials, the allocation of land, access to cheaper credit and loans and a variety of other financial and judicial measures.

Governments also tend to favor quantitative measurements of quality in Higher Education as they are seen as more tangible, generally simpler to collect (usually being a series of numerical or statistical data) and less problematic in their analysis although their interpretation and judgment is often contentious. This dependency on quantitative data is often seen as a requirement of HEIs to produce and publish Performance Indicators (PIs) on a number of 'outcomes', for example: student passing rates; student dropout rates; employment of graduates; staff/student ratios; cost per student; class sizes; number of laboratories or other learning support resources such as books or PCs; number of staff publications; etc.

Governments tend to be keen on PIs because they can be scored and ranked and so give an illusion of objective quality comparators and of accountability especially when PIs are measured against sector benchmarks. However PIs very rarely explain why something is the way it is: for example, if the sector average for drop out rates is 12% why does university X have an average of 16%? Is it because their assessment procedures are more rigorous and therefore an indicator of quality; is it because the institution is indifferent to the progress and welfare of its students and therefore an indicator of poor performance; or

⁸ The current proposal for the block grant allocated through a funding formula to fund public higher education includes a 10% top slice for incentive funding for the recruitment and graduation of female students and disadvantaged students. In the future the Government may decide to change these categories

⁹ The Unit currently responsible for the pre-accreditation, accreditation and renewal of accreditation for private HEIs is to move from the Ministry of Education and become part of HERQA

perhaps it is because it specializes in subjects (such as teacher training) that require complex skill development but not attract the best students?¹⁰

Ranking of universities is a controversial matter, heavily criticised because of the way in which rankings often reduce complex activities and relationships into a simple number or rank that often only gives a spurious impression of the difference between two or more universities (what, for example, is the difference between a university that scores 4.6 and one that scores 4.8 as occurred in the Netherlands some years ago?). There is also often disagreement over what components should be included and how they are interpreted and the judgments drawn are often contentious.

PIs do have some use as a general overview but there needs to be considerable caution in using them as an accurate measure of quality and an institution's efficiency. It is also important to understand that, as Vroeijenstijn notes, efficiency is not the same as quality:

In assessing quality, an important question will be, "Do we achieve the required level of quality with acceptable costs?" An efficiency-oriented approach as such is a good starting point, but the problem is that efficiency is not always defined as 'against acceptable costs' but often as 'against minimal costs' and this may be a threat to quality.¹¹

Employers

Employers expect a Higher Education system that offers 'fitness for purpose'. In other words, a system that produces graduates that meet the needs of the country's industries and services. Graduates should not only match the vacancies that business and organizations wish to fill but also have the necessary skills that will enable them to work effectively in a modern and more dynamic manner. In UK this is usually translated into phrases like transferable and/or employment skills. These may include communication (both in English and local languages) and numeric skills, time keeping, team working skills, problem-solving and research skills and increasingly important skills in

¹⁰ for a detailed analysis of the problem associated with PIs see CHEMS paper 30 University League Tables Rankings: Critical Analysis and Canada" in Chapter 3 and 'The time's Good University Guide' in chapter 5 of Benchmarking in Higher Education: An International Review, both available online at <http://www.acu.ac.uk/cgi-bin/framest.pl?ml=yaerbook&s1+yaearbook&select=yearbook>

¹¹ Vroeijenstijn 1995:16

information technology and entrepreneurialism. Preliminary research conducted by the Ethiopian Higher Education Strategy Centre (HESC) in relation to the curriculum for the proposed new universities suggests that employers and other organizations in Ethiopia require a similar set of skills including:

- Practical competences, the ability to put theory into practice
- Self-confidence
- Inquisitiveness and creativity coupled with the ability to think analytically
- Proficiency in English as well as local languages.¹¹

Stakeholders, such as employers and professional organizations, increasingly demand some degree of involvement in the design of curricula and teaching methodologies to ensure that graduates are fit for the purposes of industry and commerce and that these transferable and employability skills are integrated into all curricula. Employers also seem keen to support internships and work placements (for students) and work shadowing for (HEI staff).

Students

In countries where the Higher Education sector is being ‘massified’, Governments are increasingly looking for alternative sources of funding as they can rarely finance the cost of expansion solely through the public purse. This means that increasingly students are being asked to contribute to their education, a price that they are expected to pay for the the ‘privilege’ of Higher Education.

So what is it that students want from Higher Education, especially now that a cost-sharing scheme has been introduced that will require students to pay back from salaries the cost of their board and lodging and a percentage of their tuition whilst at the University? ¹² What students will ask for could be summed up by the phrase ‘value for money’ that what they pay for both directly (through fees to private universities and through cost sharing for public universities) and indirectly (through other costs such as sacrifices that they or their families may make to support a student through Higher

¹² See Higher Education Proclamation 351/2003 Section 4 Article 56

Education or loss of income whilst studying) are matched by the benefits that they receive after graduation. Benefits may most obviously translate into good employment opportunities but may also for some/many students mean other more nebulous qualities such as greater independence in their intellectual life, greater autonomy in being able to make life decisions and a better quality of life in general. There is much research, both in developed as well as developing countries, that indicate that the higher the educational attainments of an individual the better their life improves in many ways. These are improved health, longer life, higher income, more security in the provision of basic necessities, etc.¹³

Students also want to be reassured that their particular program meets certain minimum standards, however when consulted for HESO, echoing employers' concerns, students complain that courses are too theoretical and insufficiently focused on the world of work or the Ethiopian context. Students would generally welcome some opportunity to contribute to the development of curricula but this does not seem to be the norm. If they were involved, students would press for more practical teaching and process-based assessments such as reports, projects and placements. They would welcome more relevant work-orientated curricula that enabled them to develop problem solving and other relevant skills.

Students will often define 'quality' as good teaching, teaching that allows the student to learn effectively and that is supported by an assessment process that is fair and clearly understood by students. Students also define "quality" as a system that is fair to them, eliminates bias or quirks in marketing and ensures no gender or ethnic discrimination. 'Good' teaching and learning for students will be supported by adequate resources such

¹³ See for example World Bank, (2002) *Constructing New Knowledge Societies: new challenges for tertiary education.*, Hauptman, AM (1999) or 'Student-based higher education financing policies in International Higher education , 14 5-6. or Johnstone, DB and Marcucci, P (2003) 'Cost sharing and higher education in southern and eastern Africa.' *International Higher Education*, 30. 9-11.

as libraries and ICT centers plus other support systems such as tutorial and counseling or additional support for women students.

Parents

It is axiomatic that parents will always worry about the quality, value and cost of their children's education whatever the level. For parents of Higher Education students, there is now the additional burden of cost-sharing. Their children once in employment will be required to pay back a percentage of their education. However, it is often the more obvious and immediate costs that concern parents. If a son or daughter is at the university, it is unlikely that they are also in employment and able to either bring in some income to the family home or even support themselves. Particularly in countries like Ethiopia where there is still only a very small middle-class that is able to support their children financially through Higher Education, most students come from poor agricultural families and will demand some kind of financial sacrifice from their families, either through the absence of additional income or else through the additional financial support that the son or daughter requires to undertake their studies. This may be particularly exacerbated by the study of certain subjects, such as certain areas of medicine or science that require the purchase of specialist equipment, clothing or other items. HEIs are generally not in a sufficiently strong financial position to provide these additional items themselves free of charge.

Parents in both developed and developing countries make sacrifices to give their children the opportunities that they never had (many distinguished academics in the UK are the first person in their families to go through Higher Education, a result of the 'massif' growth that took place in the UK HE system in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ So, for parents 'quality' is likely to be judged by the extent to which parents and their children's aspirations are realized, the type of job they attain after graduation, the financial security and status they experience as graduates etc.

14 See Ashcroft 2004

HEI Managers

HEI managers throughout the world increasingly have to cope with the consequences of mass fiction; processing more students with a reducing unit of funding. This means that their role is changing and that professional, trained managers are now needed who can deal with human resource management, financial planning and many other non-academic tasks.

Managers however generally want everything to run smoothly without problems or hindrance and so will be keen to meet internal and external quality standards (if only to avoid criticism if not for any other more principled reason) but they should also want both staff and students to be satisfied with the provision and resources that are on offer. The HESO study indicated that one of the biggest challenges for HEI managers currently in Ethiopia is to know exactly what is going on in their departments or faculties and to be able to identify examples of good practice that can be disseminated, and to be aware of possible problematic or weak areas that can be helped to improve. Managers in HEIs, both public and private, should be asking themselves: How do we know that we are doing the right things? How do we know that we are doing the right things in a right way? How do we know that our graduates are meeting the expected requirements? And how do we know that we are providing quality?

One of the ways of doing this is to undertake comprehensive internal quality audits, either at departmental or institutional level.¹⁵ HESO found that currently, institutions generally focus their quality assurance on the quality of certain inputs (curriculum design, staff qualification and so on). They assess to a lesser extent the quality of processes (e.g. instruction and curriculum coverage), but few have a systematic approach for assuring themselves of the quality and standards of outcomes (e.g. comparable grading systems, assessment of the employability of graduates and so on). The quality and standards of academic outcomes is the most important feature of Higher Education Institutions and so

¹⁵ see the paper 'Quality audit in higher education: lesson learned from piloting work in a public and a private university' also presented at this conference by Dr. Tesfaye Teshome and dr. Philip Rayner.

this lack is crucial. Well developed self evaluation processes can be time consuming but are worthwhile to do. The return on the investments of time and people are high because through this process of internal audit managers know what is going in their areas and can plan more effectively the work of the Academic Development Resources Centres

(ADRCs) that are to be set up in the publicly funded HEIs and develop staff development programmes that are based on needs rather than individual opportunity.

HERQA expects universities to take a lead role in the development of quality assurance in Ethiopia. It is also an expectation of HERQA that HEIs, both public and private will start to undertake their own internal audits and that they will certainly have undertaken one prior to any external quality evaluation visit undertaken by HERQA. So, if it is not done soon it is likely that HEIs will soon find that they have no choice and that internal quality audits will be part of HERQA's quality assurance process.

Faculty

The question of what quality means to the faculty of institutions is perhaps even less clear cut. Until recently some of the world's more traditional universities tended to assume that, in the words of Trow, 'universities embody quality. They do not need to demonstrate it.'¹⁶ Fortunately, notions of accountability have shifted most complacent attitudes although often and usually erroneously, faculty responses to questions of quality are seen as 'special pleading' ('I need more research time, a better computer, less students to supervise', a bigger laboratory, etc.). It can also be seen as yearning for an (illusory?) golden past where students, theoretically at least, were 'better' (which is often code for less in number). Faculties often aspire to being a 'centre of excellence' as if this is what quality is all about. This may be an aspect of quality but only if the purpose is defined as being excellent and if, of course, it is actually achieved. It is unlikely that more than a very few departments in one or two universities in Ethiopia can realistically achieve international 'centre of excellence' status and in any case this will only benefit a small minority of students. It is more important that the majority of students in all the

¹⁶ Trow 200:16

universities have a high-quality experience and whilst perhaps not achieving ‘excellence’ will at least achieve a good standard.

It is true that mass Higher Education in most countries has been, at best, difficult for faculty to adjust to.¹⁷ Despite the claims of a minority of instructors encountered during the research undertaken last year for the HESO Report and this year for HERQA¹⁸ there is nothing intrinsic about mass education that leads to a decrease in quality. This only happens if instructors and managers in HEIs do nothing to prepare for the changing circumstances whether it is additional resources (what most faculty ask for), larger class sizes (what most managers ask for) or a change in teaching and assessment methods (what HERQA may most likely ask for).

For individual teaching staff, it can be a very threatening process to find that over a relatively short period of time, the class sizes have increased from 25 in a class to perhaps 125. What worked for 25 students will most probably not work for 125 and experienced instructors may find that their students are not performing as well as they used to nor are they as satisfied as they used to be. New methods and strategies are likely to be needed; assessment methods probably need to be re-assessed. All this will take time to plan, refine and implement and some new methods may not work or senior instructors may have conflicting demands on their time, perhaps because of research projects that have deadlines that need to be met. Mass Education can be threatening on both a personal and professional level as well as seemingly threatening quality standards.

Quality for faculty therefore has to be demonstrated to be possible with the large increase in numbers that are planned for the future of the Higher Education sector. The experience in other countries such as England suggest that it is possible to greatly expand the number of undergraduates and graduates going through the Higher Education system and still

¹⁷ See Ashcroft 2004

¹⁸ Two institutions, one public and one private have undertaken pilot quality audits under the auspices of HERQA. One, the private college, reported back on the lessons learnt to the Association of Private Colleges and Universities. The other, a public university, has not yet published its report.

provide a high quality provision. The ‘trick’ is to learn from the UK experience and others system where massification has been successfully implemented without loss of quality and needs and to provide instructors with planned and sustained training that gives instructors the skills and tools necessary to teach and assess in this new environment.

Currently in HEIs there seems to be a few structured opportunities to update subject knowledge or pedagogic training. According to many instructors opportunities for staff development are largely based on the individual instructor’s ability to attract funding. Currently student centered teaching is often seen as burden. Perhaps the gradual introduction of a structured system of performance review and appraisal would be helpful, especially if it were coupled with some kind of reward system for outstanding performance and clear and effective process for dealing with underperformance. These could be incorporated into more coherent staff development policies and plans. HEIs could also consider introducing some kind of structured programme of regular teacher/peer observation that is supportive of instructors and is seen as part of the instructor’s opportunity to improve his or her own performance rather than as a punitive measure.

The newly established ADRCs in the public institutions should be able to serve that function as they become operational. In the private sector consortium of in-service training, to pay for similar input may be a possible way forward.

Donors

There are various donors involved in the reform and expansion of Higher Education in Ethiopia, the World Bank, Department for International Development (DfID), European Union EU, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Developmental Programme (UNDP), Netherlands Organization for International cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC) amongst others. Whilst they may focus on different projects and different aspects of the Higher Education sector, they all share a common ambition: to see a well-structured, comprehensive and equitable

sector that corresponds to international standards and assist the country in meeting its development targets. The donors agree a robust quality assurance system is crucial to the success and credibility of any new ‘massified’ Higher Education system.¹⁹

As growth in the sector is partially predicated on a major expansion of the private sector any quality assurance function also has to ensure that the public are protected from fraudulent and questionable quality providers that may emerge in the midst of such rapid private expansion.

Thus ‘quality’ for donors will be less about specific measures or criteria but more about ensuring that an effective system is in place and functions correctly:

To be effective, its (HERQA’s) goals, policies, and actions must be carefully thought out and implemented so that it is not just another bureaucratic hurdle but rather focuses on the quality and outcomes of student learning in tertiary institutions. Its aims, procedures, and standards must be acceptable to the public, the academic community, and the National government.²⁰

Donors will also want reassurance that the body responsible for quality assurance, HERQA, is independent of external influence or vested interests. HERQA must be able to demonstrate its operational autonomy from influence or pressure from the Ministry of Education or Government and should be seen to undertake its responsibilities in a fair and transparent manner.

Donors are also concerned with sustainability, ensuring that the support that they give will last and help to build capacity within the system. Donors are therefore very concerned about the impact of HIV/AIDS on the Higher Education sector.

HIV/AIDS should be the foremost concern for both the Government and the university community because it holds the potential to undermine the country’s increasing investments in education. AIDS now exists within all regions of

¹⁹See for example Joint Review Mission Report November 2004 in Ethiopia’s ESDP-II

²⁰ World Bank Report 2004:62

Ethiopia... Tertiary education communities are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS due to their age group (which constitutes the peak period for sexual activity and consequent risk of HIV infection), close physical proximity, relative autonomy from adult or community supervision, and inclination towards sexual networking. This vulnerability introduces a sizeable risk to the expected returns on investments made by families and government in the education of tertiary students.²¹

A study by Jimma University.²² indicated that about 12.2% of the student communities were HIV positive. Obviously this cannot be unique to Jimma University. Instead, it portrays what the situation would be like on the wider scale. A recent tracer study in three African countries of students who have graduated since 1980 highlights the impact of HIV/AIDS.

'Very sizeable proportions of the oldest (1980) graduates were deceased by 2001 in Malawi (25 per cent), in Uganda (33 per cent) and in Zimbabwe (18 per cent)' ²³

In Mozambique, it is estimated that in a few years, 8% of the teachers will die annually in AIDS-related illnesses. This is more than the number of teachers that graduated each year. Thus, the country will be confronting a declining pool of teachers.

Society at large

According to Ashcroft,²⁴ Higher Education relates to certain higher social and economic purposes and in particular: the freedom to question taken for granted assumptions and through this process the protection of democracy, the creation and transfer of knowledge and development of new practices, and the creation of today's and tomorrow's notion of professionalism.

²¹ World Bank Report 2004:VII

²²Boother 2004

²³Al-Samarri & Bennell 2003:xiii. The authors note that this is comparable to, or in excess of the graduates who leave these countries through 'brain drain.'

²⁴Ashcroft 2003:7

This is developed further in Ashcroft & Rayner:

Higher education's role in questioning authority and so protecting democracy and minority views is perhaps one of its most important in the Ethiopian context. Universities sit alongside the judiciary, a free press, and a parliament as representing one of the pillars of a democratic society²⁵.

This implies that academic freedom is a precious commodity and HERQA, as an 'arms-length' autonomous 'oversight' agency, is essential in the protection of this institutional autonomy.

According to the Vice Minister for Higher Education, HE Teshome Yizengaw, Higher Education in Ethiopia is 'essential for survival in the global knowledge-based era' as institutions of Higher Education provide

'the human resources required for leadership, management, business and professional positions that are important for economic and social development²⁶

'Quality' for the society at large then can be seen as accountability for both the responsibilities of academic freedom and for privileged position faculty occupy in a democratic society as well as accountability for the public funds that public universities rely up on . Society at large will is to see their returns on the investment that they made, as individuals and as a Nation, in the Higher Education, its staff, its students and its resources.

HERQA

And so what is HERQA's own perception of 'quality'? The organization is still in its infancy (or perhaps adolescence is a more apt description) and its staff are still learning about the complexity of quality issues. The more they learn, the more they realize that

²⁵ Ashcroft and Rayner 2004a:3

²⁶ Yizengaw 2004:2

the answer to this question of ‘what is quality?’ is elusive – it seems that the more we know the more difficult it becomes to answer.

HERQA’s vision (still provisional) sets out how HERQA would like to be seen in five or ten years time.

HERQA’s vision is to be a nationally and internationally recognized center of excellence in the safeguarding, accreditation and enhancement of standards and quality in higher education.²⁷

HERQA also shares the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency’s (QAA) aim:

‘...to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of Higher Education qualifications, and to encourage the continuous improvement in the management of the quality of Higher Education.’²⁸

According to Ashcroft²⁹, some of the main purposes of quality assurance in developing countries such as Ethiopia are to ensure minimum standards: to measure volume, to rank excellence, and to foster improvement

According to Vroeijstijn³⁰, an organization such as HERQA should aim to improve teaching and learning, promote accountability, contribute to planning procedures and inform society about the state of Higher Education.

To achieve these aims HERQA needs to set standards by which it has to operate and to conform to the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education’s (INQAAHE) code of good practice. For example according to the code of practice, HERQA should: have an explicit set of objectives; should respect institutional

²⁷ HERQA Plan of Operation 1998 (EC)

²⁸QAA 2002

²⁹Ashcroft 2003:10

³⁰ Vroeijenstijn 1995:34

integrity and autonomy; should have adequate and credible resources, both human and financial; provide clear documentation for both self and external evaluations; ensure that its external evaluation committees act impartially and transparently; include, inform and respond to the public; provide a method of appeals against its decisions; collaborate with other international quality agencies; recognize that quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of the Higher Education Institutions themselves; and finally but perhaps most crucially, HERQA should have a system of quality assurance for its own activities to ensure that

The agency carries out self-review, based on data collected and analysis, including consideration of its own effects and value. The agency commissions external reviews and there is evidence that the results are used.³¹

Conclusion

It is perhaps anomalous to suggest that the various stakeholders described in this article are in any way similar to the many heads of the Greek monster the Hydra. However, to stretch the metaphor, it is possible to see the concept of ‘quality’ as a mythical beast which has many facets and that each of these needs facets needs to be addressed individually and yet also the monster itself needs to be dealt with as a whole.

The question then is what is the relationship between the parts, the various stakeholders and their particular perspectives on what ‘quality’ is and the sum of the parts, ‘quality’ as a totality for the sector and for HERQA? And how does the sum of these parts help us answer the question posed at the beginning of the paper ‘what is quality?’

Vroeijerstijn recommends those involved in quality assessment should not try to discover a definition of quality since ‘It is a waste of time’. Vroeijerstijn argues that ‘quality’ in Higher Education does not exist but that there are many concepts, many definitions and many interpretations. He notes however that

³¹See http://www.inqahe.org/docs/Principles_of_Good_Practice

‘every party concerned (students, staff, government, employers) should make clear what quality requirements are’³²

It is perhaps therefore unrealistic to expect all the stakeholders in Higher Education to agree and share a common definition of ‘quality’ except in the very broadest sense.

Vroeijenstijn, among others suggests that quality is ‘doing the right things in the right way’ – however (and by whoever) these may be defined. Perhaps unjustly, those working in HEIs in Ethiopia, both managers and faculty, have frequently been blamed for the weaknesses that exist in the current system of education, for not ‘doing the right things in the right way’. It seems unfair to blame a small group of intelligent, dedicated and hard working people for faults that are perhaps the consequence of having to deal with other more pressing national priorities, political instability, economic stagnation and long term under-investment. Leadership in the HEIs, both public and private, is seen to be trying to make the changes and to improve the provision that is offered to

stakeholders. However, this will take time. In Europe’s more sophisticated, more developed, better resourced, longer existing Higher Education sector these problems of balancing the conflicting interests of the many stakeholders in Higher Education, is still a difficult balancing act: one that is constantly being re-appraised. It is therefore to the credit of all involved in the Ethiopian Higher Education sector, both public and private, that Higher Education is in as strong a position as it is. There is such strong commitment and determination in HEIs that Higher Education should improve, become comparable to International standards and assist the country in meeting its developmental needs.

What type of higher education a country needs and thus how its ‘quality’ is defined, should be part of the political debate that takes place within a country. There needs to be greater articulation and discussion between the various sectors of education in Ethiopia, particularly between higher education, TVET, the secondary sector and the Regional Education Bureaus.

³² Vroeijenstijn 1995:40.

Many countries throughout the world are ‘massif’ growth in their higher education system and have to face the issue on how to ensure quality within an expanding system. For HERQA to ensure quality standards it needs the support and cooperation of all the other stakeholders in Ethiopian higher education. ‘Quality’ cannot be achieved in isolation, and it cannot be imposed from above, it has to be a communal effort. Eventually all of us involved in the Higher Education sector will have to work together to ensure that we are ‘do the right things in the right way’.

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See also:

INQAAHE	www.inqaahe.org
HERQA	www.higher.edu.et
QAA	www.qaa.ac.uk

Quality Assurance in Higher Education:

A Study of Developing Countries David Lim £25.00 Hardcover 186 pages (March 28, 2001) Publisher: Ashgate ISBN: 0754617122 Synopsis Universities in developing countries have followed their counterparts in developed countries and adopted quality assurance to improve the quality of their activities. This text examines the wisdom of such a move when many of the conditions necessary for its success are not present. It concludes that quality assurance can be useful in developing countries because it shows how a university's seemingly disparate activities are related to one another to serve a common goal and how the quality of these can best be improved by using an integrated approach. Quality assurance also provides more focus and direction to the work of the traditional university system. However, it must be modified to suit the conditions prevailing in developing countries by being simple in design, modest in expectations and realistic in requirements.

