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Institutional Self Evaluation: A pre-requisite for External Quality Audit

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Abstract

The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) is mandated to assure the quality of public and private Higher Education in Ethiopia. Quality assurance agencies use the term 'quality assurance' to denote different practices. Each practice serves different purposes to suit the national contexts in which agencies operate and the purposes they desire to serve. Although the approaches differ to suit the national contexts, the basic essentials are similar and have the following common features: they base their quality assessment on predetermined and transparent criteria; they use an institutional self evaluation and an external review; they emphasize public disclosure of the outcomes and declare the outcomes valid for a specific period of time.

Most often quality assurance agencies follow a three stage process in their attempt to assure quality. The first stage requests higher education institutions to prepare a self-evaluation report and provide relevant information on the quality of educational programs they offer related to predetermined and well publicized criteria. The second stage focuses on a site visit by a team of external quality auditors to validate the self-evaluation report. The third stage is the final decision by the agency on the review team's recommendations and disclosure of the audit outcome. To that end, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency has reviewed experiences of quality agencies in selected countries and developed and publicized criteria for quality assurance in HEIs in Ethiopia.

To date seven public universities have carried out and submitted self evaluation reports to the agency and two universities have been audited. These are important steps in the development of quality assurance for higher education in the country and are learning experiences for all concerned. The agency and all HEIs are expected to continue to work hard to improve the quality of the self-evaluation reporting and in providing relevant information for judging the quality of institutions and their programs.

This paper describes the basic elements of the first stage of HERQA's quality assurance system: a self-evaluation report of a Higher Education institution as a pre-requisite for an external quality audit. It outlines the purposes of an institutional self-evaluation, deals with the quality focus areas, the procedures to be followed for self-evaluation, the self-evaluation report and its use for quality enhancement.

Introduction

The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) is mandated to assure the quality of Higher Education provided by public and private institutions in Ethiopia: (Higher Education Bill, No351/2003). Most quality assurance agencies use the term 'quality assurance' to denote different practices. Each practice serves different purposes to suit the national contexts in which agencies operate and the purpose they desire to serve. Although, the approaches differ to suit the national contexts the basic essentials are similar and have the following common features: they base their quality assessment on predetermined and transparent criteria; they use an institutional self evaluation and an external review; they emphasize public disclosure of the outcomes and declare the outcomes valid for a specific period of time (UNESCO, 2006).

Most often quality assurance agencies follow a three stage process in their attempt to assure quality. The first stage requests Higher Education institutions to prepare a self-evaluation report and provide relevant information related to predetermined and well publicized criteria on the quality of educational programs they offer. The second stage focuses on a site visit by a team of external quality auditors to validate the self-evaluation report. This results in a recommendation to the agency about the quality of the institution or a program. The third stage is a decision by the agency on the audit team's recommendations and disclosure of the audit outcome. To that end, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency has reviewed experiences of quality agencies in selected countries and developed and publicized criteria for quality assurance in HEIs in Ethiopia. The quality assessment criteria were presented to representatives from public and private HEIs, professional associations and other relevant organizations. Comments and suggestions were incorporated and finally the guidelines and assessment tools were endorsed by the HERQA Board for implementation.

HERQA distributed the manuals and procedures to all private and public HEIs offering degree programs and requested eight public universities to submit self-evaluation reports to HERQA to initiate the first external quality audits of Higher Education in the history of Ethiopia. To date, seven public universities have carried out self-evaluations and submitted their self-evaluation reports to the agency. The agency has carried out two audit visits and has scheduled to undertake audit visits to all the other HEIs that have submitted self-evaluation reports. These are important steps in the development of quality assurance for higher education in the country and are learning experiences for all concerned. The agency and all HEIs are expected to continue work hard to improve the quality of the self-evaluation reporting and in providing relevant information to judge the quality of institutions and their programs.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the basic elements of the first stage of HERQA's quality assurance system: a self-evaluation report of a Higher Education institution as a pre-requisite for an external quality audit. It outlines the purposes of an intuitional self-evaluation, deals with the quality focus areas, the procedures to be followed for self-evaluation, the self-evaluation report and its use for quality enhancement.

Purposes of institutional self-evaluation

HERQA envisages undertaking institutional quality audit in all HEIs to assure quality. An institutional quality audit is an in-depth assessment and analysis of the quality and relevance of programs and the teaching environment (HERQA Publication Series: 013, 2007). An institutional quality audit will also assess the effectiveness of a HEI's system of accountability and the internal quality assurance mechanism put in place. The pre-requisite for the institutional quality audit is the preparation of the self-evaluation report by the institution. The preparation of a self-evaluation report requires a systematic investigation of the teaching and learning environment and identifies strengths and weakness. The HEI

should also identify effective mechanisms to monitor and enhance the quality and relevance of its programs. Not only that, a HEI should also identify its good practices (*i.e.* ways in which it enhances quality) and the ways in which these are disseminated to its various sections and the Higher Education sector as a whole.

HERQA's institutional and program accreditation process in Ethiopian Higher Education is different for public and private HEIs. Currently the institutional and program accreditation of private HEIs is input based. However, the agency is interested in moving from an input based system to a processes and output based system. An audit, for instance, may look into the staff profile and mix and experience to judge the quality of the teaching staff to teach as per the aims and objectives of a program *(an input)*. In addition an audit may also look into the way students are assessed *(a process)* and the level of achievement of students *(a product)*. The major task of HERQA would then be to look at the systems that control the inputs, processes and outputs to make judgments as to their appropriateness and functioning. The agency will also track quality care mechanisms put in place and confirm HEIs' claims that such mechanisms help to enhance quality. HERQA gives high attention to how HEIs set standards for their awards, how they maintain these standards and how they check and assure whether their awards are comparable to national and international norms. The same procedure should also apply to public HEIs even though they are established by proclamation as autonomous HEIs. The launching of any educational program both in public and private HEIs should pass through rigorous accreditation and external quality audit processes. The issue of whether which one of them should precede is clear- quality audit should precede accreditation for private HEIs. To date HERQA is busy setting the direction and developing quality manuals and guidelines. HERQA has started to undertake external quality audit in public universities and has planned to do the same for private HEIs. It is therefore highly desirable for all HEIs to be prepared for institutional self-evaluation and external quality audits. Institutional self-evaluation is an in-depth analysis of institutional activity and serves as a stepping stone toward an external quality audit.

The role of HERQA in the institutional self-evaluation process

HERQA should determine the role it plays during the institutional self-evaluation process. This role should not be misunderstood as the owners of the intuitional self-evaluation are the HEIs. Upon the receipt of a Self Evaluation Document (SED), HERQA will consider not just what the HEI is doing but the circumstances in which it is operating. HERQA will expect the HEIs to do more than provide a good set of information but expects it to be self-critical and provide an analytical self-evaluation. HEIs will also be expected to develop useful improvement plans with detailed activities and resources required for implementation.

The underlining issue here is that quality assurance agencies should work with realistic expectation and clear goal in mind. HERQA's role should be to help HEIs become responsible for the quality of their work and the educational offerings they provide to the society.

In the initial phase of introducing external quality assurance in to a system, preparing a self-evaluation report may pose significant challenges to HEIs. HERQA should help HEIs to build capacity to develop self critical reports. If they are not helped the self-evaluation report could be incomplete and not provide a sufficient basis for an external quality audit. To that end, HERQA has given guidelines to facilitate a self-evaluation and the preparation of a self-evaluation report. In systems where the tradition of self-evaluation and external quality audit is well established a broad framework could be given by quality agencies in order to give HEIs some degree of flexibility. The self-evaluation guidelines of three quality agencies are given below for comparison (HERQA, New Zealand, and India)

Areas of focus for institutional self-assessment

The institutional self-assessment report focuses on ten agreed areas. HERQA has developed the procedures and details of institutional self-evaluation and submitted these to all public and private HEIs for implementation (HERQA publication series 13, 2007). These procedures as a whole and details of the ten focal areas were presented to representatives of public and private HEIs and professional associations where they had opportunities to offer their suggestions and comments. It is imperative that the top management of all HEIs is fully aware of these ten focal areas for self-evaluation before the actual self-evaluation is undertaken and the report is written. The team assigned to carry out the self-evaluation and write the self-evaluation report should also consult and involve all concerned bodies, particularly students, in order to get genuine information on the teaching and learning process, the overall quality assurance system that is in place and the level of academic achievements.

It is thus essential for all HEIs to note that a HERQA institutional quality audit will concentrate on the following 10 focus areas:

- ✓ Vision, Mission and Educational Goals;
- ✓ Governance and Management System;

Table 1:   Guidelines for Self-Evaluation from QA Agencies

Country	Requirements

	General	**Detailed**
New Zealand www.aau.ac.nz	The main ISE document contains: ✓ A one-page history and current profile of the HEI ✓ An overview of the management and organizational structure ✓ A brief overview of the HEI's quality assurance arrangement ✓ Brief description on effectiveness of the quality assurance arrangement and examples of good practices	Details on the last two batches of students: ✓ Admitted students in undergraduate and graduate programs in the two batches ✓ Dropouts ✓ Appeared in the final year exam ✓ Passed in the final year exam ✓ Passed in the first class ✓ University ranks ✓ Books, journals subscribed and computers in the department ✓ Research projects on going and completed during the last three years, etc.
India National Assessment and Accreditation Council	HEI is expected to ✓ give appraisal based its own perception ✓ hand over its ISE which the EQA team use ✓ provide information on distinguished achievements ✓ identify challenges encountered	
Ethiopia HERQA www.higher.edu.et	HERQA demands information on a) Institutional level ✓ HEIs short history ✓ A list of programs ✓ Statistical data on students enrolment, etc (b) Quality and relevance assurance system at all levels (Section, Department, Faculty and Institution) (c) ISE level ✓ Information on how the ISE is prepared-involvement of stakeholders, etc (d) Quality and relevance of programs:- HEIs judgement on the ten focal areas (e) Good practices (f) Plans for quality enhancement	Detailed information required by HERQA, see Table 2.

Table 2: Examples of detailed information on staff profile and staff and student ratio required by HERQA

Academic Staff Profile of University Faculty 1: Academic Rank based

No	Program	Professor		Assistant Professor		Associate Professor		Lecturer		Assistant Lecturer		Graduate Assistant	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	A												
2	B												
3	C												

Academic staff profiles of University A Faculty 1: Academic Qualifications based

No	Program	PhD		MA/MSc		BA/BSc		Advanced Diploma		Diploma	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	A										
2	B										
3	HERQA standard										

Academic staff profile of University A, Faculty 1: Student/Staff Ratio

No	Program	Number of Students	Number of Staff	Student/Staff Ratio
1	A			
2	B			
3	C			

- ✓ Infrastructure and Learning Resources;
- ✓ Academic and Support Staff;
- ✓ Student Admission and Support Services;
- ✓ Program Relevance and Curriculum;

- ✓ Teaching, Learning and Assessment;
- ✓ Student Progression and Graduate Outcomes;
- ✓ Research and Outreach Activities; and
- ✓ Internal Quality Assurance.

The above quality focal areas cover the activities of the HEIs in their entirety: inputs, processes and outputs.

Quality assurance, quality care and enhancement

PHEIs need quality assurance units or other responsible bodies that are responsible for assuring the quality of the educational programs, research and community services that they offer. The duties and responsibilities of a quality assurance unit should be well defined including its organizational set up. Quality assurance needs to be given importance if a HEI is to compete successfully and survive in a situation where industry and the general labor market demand guarantees and also a changing set of knowledge and abilities.

To cater for this HEIs need to have well staffed quality assurance units with adequate resources. Most of the universities in Ethiopia have a number of Senate Standing Committees responsible for several activities. For example, there are Senate Standing Committees for Student Admission and Placement, Senate Standing Committees for Staff Scholarships and Promotion but probably no Senate Standing Committees for Quality Assurance. Most universities have no quality assurance policy or developed strategy to assure quality.

In universities where the quality culture is well established such as the University of Bristol, UK and University of Malaya, Malaysia, strong quality assurance units exist and are chaired by a faculty dean and a senior staff member, respectively. The Quality Assurance Management Unit in the University of Malaya has more than 14 staff working

for more than 80% of their time. These institutions give considerable importance to quality and consider this as a mainstay for their existence.

Substantial efforts have been put into establishing Academic Development Resource Centers (ADRCs) in the nine public universities. The roles and responsibilities of the ADRCs focus on quality care, staff development, professional resource and service (HERQA-EQUIP workshop proceedings, 2005). The roles of ADRCs are thus more focused on quality enhancement than quality assurance. The preparation of the self-evaluation reports of HEIs seems to be left with no responsible unit. In general, the above roles and responsibilities appear not to be well understood by the ADRC members and the university community at large. HEIs need to clearly identify the roles of ADRCs and think of establishing a unit for quality assurance and thus responsible for self evaluation and the preparation of the self-evaluation report. These are demanding tasks that have to be done in a professional manner as per the HERQA procedures. The self-evaluation requires gathering of information and data through consultations with the management, faculty deans and department heads, staff, students, employers and graduates. It should also not be considered as a one time activity but as something that should be a regular event.

Self-evaluation procedures

PHEIs need to be clear about the procedures to undertake self-evaluation. The following procedures are identified to be adopted by all HEIs. An Institutional self evaluation may include the following procedures (HERQA publication series 13, 2007):

- ✓ Establishing a team for the self evaluation;
- ✓ Communicating a timetable for the self evaluation;
- ✓ Gathering and analyzing information for self evaluation;
- ✓ Reporting the self evaluation; and
- ✓ Making use of the self evaluation.

Establishing a team for the self evaluation

All PHEIs are advised to set up a team responsible for the self-evaluation and reporting. Some higher learning institutions such as University of Malaya, Malaysia set up Quality Assurance Management Unit (QAMU) and follow up the maintenance of quality as a day-to-day routine including the write up of the self-evaluation report as per the procedures of the national quality agency (Aregash, 2006). In the absence of such a unit it is advisable to set up a team that includes senior staff representing different faculties, administrative staff, and staff representing support services, instructors, recent graduates, employers and student representatives. It is recommended that the team consists of five to seven members representing various groups (OAQ, 2003).The team for the self-evaluation should make sure that all concerned bodies are well aware of the planned activities.

The chair person of the team should take responsibility to manage the self-evaluation process and draft the report. The chairperson should have the qualities needed for this demanding task and must be given the necessary resources.

Communicating a timetable for the self evaluation

The self-evaluation team must have access to relevant documents. It must also make sure that the objectives of the self-evaluation, its procedures, its methodology and its purposes are understood and accepted. It may be that the team will wish to observe teaching, conduct interviews, arrange focus groups or issue questionnaires. Good communication helps avoid surprise requests and visits and aids the gathering of the required qualitative and quantitative data timely and confidently.

A well scheduled timetable which indicates the activities to be undertaken framed with specific dates and times, identified personnel to be interviewed and venues to be used must be communicated in advance to avoid confusion and ensure the smooth running of the self-

evaluation process. Such a timeline enables the team and interviewees to budget their time for various activities related to the self-evaluation. These include time for data and document collection and analysis and report writing and reflection of the findings to the top management of the HEI. A timetable must be flexible and open for opportunities of the top management and the university community to reflect their opinions and enrich the SED before submission to HERQA. As a result of this the SED will be owned by the majority of the university community and it will be easier for the HEI to plan institutional quality enhancement interventions.

Gathering and analyzing information for self evaluation

The quality of educational programs, research and outreach services a HEI offers are evaluated and judged through the institutional self-evaluation process. This can be successfully carried out if done against what the HEI planned to achieve and should be based on analysis of concrete evidence. Information for a self-evaluation can be obtained from several sources. The following are the most predominant ones: analysis of documents, statistics, survey of facilities, teaching observation, interviews, questionnaire survey and written comments. For instance, public documents such as the higher education bill and other regulation from the Ministry of Education should be consulted. Internal documents such as the HEI's regulations, course catalogs, student handbooks and minutes of the Senate, Board and Senate Standing Committees are essential to a self-evaluation. The HERQA external quality auditors will certainly be requesting such documentation. The staff profile and mix should be analyzed to check the adequacy of academic and administrative staff to achieve the HEI's objectives. This too will be looked at by the external auditors.

Reporting the Self-evaluation

On the basis of the quantitative and qualitative information collected, the self evaluation team members must sit together and discuss their findings, validate their judgments and agree on recommendations to make. The team leader will need to organize the drafting of the self evaluation report (The Self Evaluation Document = SED). The self-evaluation should focus on judgments of the quality of the provision of the HEIs and of the adequacy and effectiveness of the internal quality arrangements. The SED should be presented to the top management for comments on factual errors, misrepresentation, discrepancies and omissions before it is submitted to HERQA. The SED is a key document for the HERQA external quality audit and needs to be prepared appropriately. The structure of the SED is set out by the HERQA publication-Preparing a Self-evaluation Document (HERQA QA/04/06/V1).

Use of Self-evaluation

PHEIs are working under testing conditions and are demanded by their stakeholders to provide quality programs and prove that they are doing so. The SED is an important document for the institution as it describes its activities and presents its strengths and weaknesses. It should also have a detailed plan of actions for improvement. Consequently, the institutional self-evaluation encourages the institution to engage in systematic and continuous quality enhancement. The SED must recognize the achievements of the HEI and identify weak areas for improvement. It needs to be disseminated for information and for informed decision making among the university community and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

It is the sole responsibility of each HEI to assure the quality of the programs and services it offers. The contribution of institutional self-evaluation is immense in this regard. Self-evaluation assists a HEI to identify its strengths and weakness. The current accreditation

process for Private Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia is input based. Institutional quality audit will undoubtedly contribute in bringing paradigm shift from input based system to an input, process and output based accreditation system. The self-evaluation process is thus an important process a HEI should value as it recognizes its achievements and good practices. It also identifies weakness and details a plan of action for quality enhancement. Institutional Self-evaluation being a pre-requisite of external quality audit will thus play a great role in bringing real changes in quality assurance.

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