Promoting Quality in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges for the Private
Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper is based on evidence collected from visits to eight public sector and three private sector higher education institutions visited on behalf of the *Higher Education Systems Overhaul Report of the Higher Education Strategy Overhaul Committee of Inquiry into Governance. Leadership and Management in Ethiopia's Higher Education System Overhoul* (HESO) study and a further two visits to private sector institutions on behalf of the Quality and Relevance Assurance Agency (QRAA) and the Ethiopian Higher Education Strategy Institute (EHESI) and the analysis undertaken by the HESO study. It suggests that private higher education institutions (HEIs) should focus on improving their quality systems in order to:

- provide students and their families with quality information to ensure market share and a return on educational investments;

- develop quality systems to assure Government that an investment in the private sector would yield appropriate returns in terms of development goals;

- influence the processes developed by the QRAA for accreditation and subject assessment; and

- raise the profile and esteem of the private higher education sector amongst stakeholders.

The paper describes a variety of methods that might be used to assure quality and standards. These include benchmarking, performance indicators, quality audit and quality assessment. It then outlines some foci suggested by the World Bank that might usefully be employed in quality assessment or audit before considering the need to critically assess the accountability burden and the nature of evidence within whatever quality assurance systems that are developed.

1. Introduction

In March 2004, the Ministry of Education decided to undertake a higher education system overhaul (HESO) focused on improving the governance, management and leadership of the Ethiopian higher education system in order to achieve the objectives of the higher education reforms signalled by the Higher Education Proclamation, Number 315/2003 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2003). To this end, it set up a committee of enquiry (the HESO team) to undertake a study and make recommendations for action. This paper is partly based on the report of the HESO team (Ashcroft 2004) and focuses on the role of quality enhancement and assurance in enabling private higher education institutions to contribute to the necessary expansion of higher education and the economic and social development goals for higher education.

In 2002/3 those Private HEIs accredited by the Ministry of Education accounted for 35,402 students or 24% of student enrolments (Saint 2004). Dr. Teshome, speaking on 20th May 2004 at the HESO Consultative meeting at the Ministry of Education, predicted that in 3 to 5 years time private HEIs would account for between 40-50% of HE student enrolments. This expansion of market share would be happening at the same time as total student numbers within the combined private and public sectors are set to double. If the projected expansion came to pass, the combined effect of the projected growth in total student numbers and the increase in the private sector's share would be a quadrupling of the enrolments of students in private HEIs over the next five years.

Ethiopian higher education institutions generally rely on the individual action, competence and ethics of each instructor to ensure the quality of their programs and teaching. Massification of higher education in Ethiopia has already exacerbated the problem of a lack of quality assurance systems. The present arrangements cannot be valid in a mass system, where there must be more checks and balances built in and less reliance on individual effort and knowledge.

The Higher Education Institutions may wish to consider the purposes that underlie monitoring and evaluation information. South Africa's Council on Higher Education (2004) identifies three purposes or motivations for monitoring (using qualitative and quantitative data) and evaluation: to shed light on national policy goals and identify and explain success, deviation and failure; to create data that may be utilized by stakeholders and HEIs to improve their performance, and to discern trends over time and so inform HEI and national policy and strategy. Thus, monitoring information including quality information has utility for Government, its agencies, HEIs and other stakeholders.

2. Research Methodology

This study draws on evidence collected for the HESO report. The methodology is discussed in detail in another paper presented at this conference (Rayner and Ashcroft 2004). It included visits to eight public sector institutions during which 34 meetings with various internal stakeholders took place, tours of sites were conducted and discussions with individual faculty managers occurred. It also draws on extensive discussions with the HESO team drawn from eight public and private sector HEIs and the Ministry of Education; extensive readings by the team and a consultation meeting at which written and oral feedback on the HESO report was received from the heads (or their representatives) of 26 HEIs.

The paper also draws on various visits by the authors to HEIs (not included in the HESO study), including the Mass Media Training Institute, Unity University College and St Mary's College.

3. Results and Discussions

The World Bank suggests that the function of quality assurance is to "hold institutions ultimately accountable for their performance in teaching and research, and provide learners with a guarantee that they will receive a certain standard of education in return for their investment of time and resources" (World Bank 2004:xv). We found that there appears to be no fully functional nationally established system of quality assurance in Ethiopia that would serve this purpose. We also noted that there seems to be no systematic quality assurance tradition or practice within individual institutions, public or private and although there was evidence of some good practice, this was largely ad hoc and uncoordinated. This is a particularly critical lack in the private sector, which, if it is to continue to expand, fulfil the role that the Government has for it and maximise the returns it is able to achieve from its educational endeavour, and will need to offer guarantees to its various stakeholders regarding the availability of appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities to students. At present, not only stakeholders, most particularly students and their families but also including employers and others, must take such measures on trust in a context where there is considerable mistrust of the motives and practices of the private sector.

In our visits, we were not able to ascertain any adequate system of monitoring or endorsement that ensures that the outputs of an HEI, either public or private, meet the development needs of the country. The private sector, in the feedback meeting on the HESO report held on 20 May 2004, made it clear that expansion of the system would be greatly enhanced by the support of Government by way of making of 'soft' loans, accessible to free training for staff, preferential access to land, tax relief and easing of import restrictions. As we have noted in another paper at this conference (Rayner and Ashcroft 2004), it is most unlikely that the Government will agree to this kind of investment unless it sees an equivalent return in terms of the private sector's contribution to development goals. Such a contribution can best be evidenced through systematic and quality focused assurance systems.

The Higher Education Proclamation set up the Quality and Relevance Assurance Agency (QRAA). This body will accredit private institution; review the performance of both public and private higher education institutions and safeguard comparable standards of quality for degree programs in both public and private higher education. As yet it has made no progress towards thinking through how it might go about quality and relevance assessment and how it might modify its accreditation process. There exists, therefore, a window of opportunity for the private higher education institutions to use their association to discuss, develop within their own institutions and bring forward to the QRAA new methods of quality assurance and appropriate criteria for assessing quality and relevance. Such proactive thinking could enable the best of the private HEIs to create a market advantage over the public sector and to differentiate themselves from less worthy private HEIs.

In the paper below, we consider each of these incentives for the development of quality assurance processes in more detail:

- The need to provide students and their families with quality information to ensure market share and a return on educational investments;

- The desirability of developing quality systems to assure the Government that an investment in the private sector would yield appropriate returns in terms of development goals;

- The opportunity to influence the processes developed by the QRAA for accreditation and subject assessment; and

- Raise the profile and esteem of the private higher education sector amongst stakeholders.

Providing Stakeholders with Quality Information

A particular problem facing the private sector is reassuring stakeholders that private HEIs offer a quality education and that it is equivalent to, or exceeds, what is offered by the public HEIs. These stakeholders include, most obviously the fee-paying public (not only the students themselves but also in many cases their families who share in the financial sacrifices necessary for a son or daughter/brother or sister to go to college), employers and both private and state-run organisations such as regional educational boards and other local authority organizations that might be potential employers of graduates from private institutions as well as the Government and donors who might promote and offer incentives to the private sector.

Without this reassurance and confidence in the private sector, the potential for growth that the expansion of HE in Ethiopia offers private HEIs may not take place. We need to remember that the growth in higher education as a whole demanded by the Ministry of Education, as recognised in the *Education Sector Development Program II (ESDP II)* (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2002) cannot be met solely through the expansion of the public sector, 'Non-Government organizations and the private sector have also a great role to play in the provision of education at all levels of education' (ESDP-II 2002: 35). It is, therefore, in the interest of the country, its growth and development that private HEIs are able to reassure their clients and able to recruit students.

In determining how to reassure stakeholders, it may be useful for private HEIs and the Association of Private Higher Education Institutions to consider a range of questions: What do we currently know about the state of provision in private HEIs? (We know that some have been 'approved' or accredited by the Ministry of Education, but does the public know what the criteria is for this approval and how rigorous it is or what it covers?). The quality

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of many of the private HEIs may be good but how can the public find out which ones? Who should tell the public: will they believe the institutions themselves? (In the UK, the more prestigious private schools have their own quality audit systems and central provision of quality and other objective information about each of the schools within their association.) How can potential students and their supporters identify those private institutions that offer 'value for money'? How do students choose between public and private institutions? (Is it merely a case of those who cannot get into public institutions opt then for private, suggesting that private is seen as second-best, somehow inferior?)

There are various positive aspects that the private sector can promote, for example, students can choose the subject and to a large extent, the location where they study. Does the private sector, for example, offer 'value-added' in terms of greater individual support perhaps through smaller class-sizes or more one-to-one tutorials? Are the private institutions better resourced in terms of their libraries or Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities? The provision of objective and comparable data about such matters will greatly assist private HEIs to make their case. They can of course, through their Association, collect and disseminate such data themselves, but this does not allow comparison (hopefully favourable) with the public sector. To achieve this, the private sector should encourage the QRAA to make the collection of such data one of the ways that it assesses quality.

Many of these questions cannot easily be answered. If the institutions themselves cannot answer them, how does the public make its decisions? Currently, there is little check to ensure minimum standards of processes and output: accreditation presently focuses almost entirely on inputs. This is reinforced through the provisions of the HE Proclamation (Articles 62 and 66).

Private sector HEIs need to find ways of providing all stakeholders with clear information about courses and qualifications to match their needs. They may need to be much more explicit about what skills, qualities and knowledge will be developed; how practical experience of the workplace will be integrated; how student feedback will be used to improve the quality of instruction, and facilities; and how students will be monitored and supported during their studies and, at the end, how they will be provided with assistance in applying for jobs and meeting employers (for example, through an employers' fair, similar to the UK Universities 'milk round', possibly sponsored by the Association of Private Higher Education Institutions). Information on quality and standards of learning and teaching will need to be made available by each higher learning institution so that potential customers can make informed decisions about what individual HEIs offer. Such information may include progression and qualification rates, the results of employer and student surveys, external examiners' reports and so on. Quality

assurance is also required to ensure value for money and best value in terms of the financial investment made by students and their families. A couple of good proxies for this are the employment rates of graduates in each subject and the graduation rates of students with different intake scores.

The protection of diversity must be a key issue within any quality system that emerges. In the Ethiopian context, the World Bank (2003) has recommended that diversity of funding (public and private provision) and mission (research, graduate and undergraduate) and scale (small and large) of HEIs should be encouraged. One of the strengths of the private sector HEIs is the specialisation of many colleges (nursing, computing, technology, etc.) that helps provide a clear focus and vision for their activities. Private HEIs, therefore, need to develop their own quality assurance mechanisms, not only in order to guarantee quality service to their stakeholders, but also to identify and publish their individual distinctions and strengths. This may be done by establishing and publicising clear aims, objectives, goals and targets for their institution and for each program. Quality assurance development at institutional level will need to take into account the differential missions of institutions and their relationship with the labor market. Institutions should consider developing a 'Student Charter' specifying the services they will receive, for example, in terms of tutor contact time, access to resources, speed of return of marked work, employment advice and study skills support and training.

Quality Systems to Encourage Government Investment in Private HEIs

The Government is increasingly concerned to secure particular outcomes. It has realised that providing resources (inputs) for certain specified activities (processes) may not necessarily lead to desirable change and development (outcomes). It is our experience that quality assurance in Ethiopia currently focuses very much on the quality of certain inputs (curriculum design, staff qualification and so on). Some HEIs 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). We suggest that the quality and standards of academic outcomes is the most important feature of higher education institutions and so this lack is a crucial flaw in any argument that the private sector may wish to bring forward, that the Government should invest in the sector. It is no longer enough to argue that, if Government wishes to achieve a quality system, it must invest on it. As an example, it would be more convincing to argue that, 75% of employers are happy with private HEI graduates, but many say they wish to see more IT competence: the private sector could then argue that with tax relief on or soft loans for technological products, the sector would aim to improve the employer satisfaction ratings by at least 10%. It would be more convincing still, if such 'perks' were requested only for HEIs that had been objectively assessed by the QRAA as reaching a quality

threshold. This argument implies that the private sector must be proactive in developing quality and relevant data and systems based on outcomes. It is also the case that other Government organisations and donors may be more inclined to provide (financial) incentives to the private sector if it is proved to be offering a quality product.

Influencing the Direction of the QRAA

The QRAA is expected to create transparency in the education system to ensure independent quality assessment and to allow international comparison between degree programs. How the QRAA will function is yet unclear, however, it is likely to act either as an inspection or as an auditing body.

The second model (audit) provides institutions with more autonomy to follow their individual mission and to define quality processes for themselves according to their circumstances (provided that these assure certain outcomes). It is more likely to lead to quality enhancement. For these reasons it seems to us that audit is likely to be preferred by the institutions over an inspection model. However, audit depends upon higher education institutions developing their own robust systems. It also requires them to have addressed in academic policy matters of relevance, and to have systems of monitoring how these policies are implemented, not only in narrow academic terms, but also in broader societal terms: for instance, in relation to the challenge of HIV/AIDS and its reflection in curricula and teaching and learning methods.

The QRAA will eventually become fully functional although it may take some years before its systems are fully operational and in a position to provide public reassurance regarding the quality of education provided in Ethiopia's public and private HEIs. This provides private HEIs with the opportunity to devise a transparent, equitable and efficient accreditation system and subject assessment process and criteria.

Below, we suggest some methods and models that the private sector might wish to explore to achieve the goals of providing quality information to students and their families; providing evidence to the Government that they should invest in private HEIs; and influencing the criteria and processes that the QRAA will use to assess quality and relevance; as well as raising the profile and esteem of the private higher education sector amongst stakeholders.

Methods of Quality Assessment

The development of quality assurance mechanisms requires institutional systems and oversight of its implementation. It requires HEIs to develop policies, plans and the means to operationalize them. Some approaches are outlined below.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking involves measuring aspects of performance or criteria so that comparisons can be made with other institutions, minimum standards set and improvements identified. Jackson and Lind (2002) indicate that measurements may be qualitative or quantitative; collaboratively or independently generated; internally or externally generated; focused on the whole or parts of an organisation; or related to inputs, outputs or processes (Jackson 2001).

In the UK, the Higher Education Funding Council has created sophisticated benchmark data of institutional performance in areas such as student access, retention and employability that take into account the subject mix within the institution, its geographical location and so on. Nevertheless, Yorke (2001) found other parameters to influence performance so that benchmarks must be carefully interpreted. In addition, benchmarks must be based on good quality and sufficient data that do not appear to be available in Ethiopia as yet. Nevertheless, benchmarking may prove useful in the HEI's internal consideration of quality issues.

Performance Indicators

Performance indicators (PIs) may include the numbers of students recruited, qualifying and finding employment and so on. They tend to be simple and numerical in order that comparisons between HEIs can be made. Drennan (2001) suggests that performance indicators should be focused on outcomes. They need to be considered in context, since they are greatly simplified version of the full 'quality picture' within the HEI. The problem in the Ethiopian context is that they need reliable data to operate appropriately, although this data may be simpler than that required for benchmarking. If PIs are to be credible, they need to be seen to be objectively produced or else the public will quickly learn to distrust or dismiss them. The QRAA may be a potential source of amassing and publicising sector-wide PIs but again this will probably not happen for some time. The Educational Statistics Annual Abstract produced by the Ministry of Education has some of this information but is largely incomprehensible even to the most informed. One source of semi-objective PIs and of appropriate interpretation of the Ministry's statistics might be the Association of Private Higher Education Institutions that could produce its own, more reader-friendly, annual report and review.

Quality Audit

Brown (2001) advocates audit as the answer to quality assessment of all higher education processes. It is a method that involves an HEI setting up its own system for assuring itself of the quality, standards and relevance of its programs. These can then be tested by 'audit trials' to determine their robustness. For example, if an institution says

that it has developed systems for ensuring that all new instructors receive pedagogic training (an input measure), for ensuring that curriculum described in the course outline approved by the Senate is covered (a process measure) and external examiners are employed for ensuring that its students reach comparable standards to other HEIs (an outcome measure), the auditing team may ask to look at committee papers and so on to determine how thoroughly these systems have been monitored and what action the HEI takes where there is a problem revealed by its monitoring.

The private HEIs (perhaps through their Association) may wish to discuss with the QRAA what sort of quality assurance systems and processes that they would expect to find. They might wish to suggest some other models. In the period that the QRAA is being set up, the Association of Private Higher Education Institutions might agree that HEI staff visit each others' institutions to look at quality assurance systems as they presently exist, and even to do mini mock-audits, so that when subject assessment, for example, becomes a reality, they have shared and developed good practice.

External Assessment

Private HEIs in Ethiopia might wish to develop a variety of external involvement within their internal quality processes. One way of doing this is through peer visiting and mock-audits of quality systems. Another form of external assessment is the external examination system, where examiners from other institutions assess a range of marked work and write a report that, amongst other criteria, assures the HEI that the standards students achieve are comparable with those of other institutions; tutors within the HEI mark consistently according to clear criteria; and the written feedback tutors give students on their work is sufficiently detailed and concrete to enable students to learn from their strengths and mistakes.

If they do not already have one, the private HEIs might also introduce a system of external membership on programme review and validation panels. Thus, when a course is designed and when it is reviewed, employers and academics from other institutions might sit on the course design panel and when the program goes to the appropriate committee for final approval other external members may be invited for the event.

It is common practice elsewhere in the world for there to be external membership on institutional and departmental committees. For instance, one of the authors was an external member on several Oxford University Department of Educational Studies Committees. In this capacity, she was able to provide the committee with insights and experiences gained from other contexts and bring the learning she gained of Oxford University processes back to

her own institution. In this way, both institutions learned new and better ways of doing things, and so quality was improved.

Another external assessment process is subject review. Such reviews generally involve a team of external academics entering the subject department and assessing its provision against a range of criteria such as the learning resources available, the quality of curriculum design, the standards evidenced in students' assessed work and so on. Various researchers, such as Knight and Trowler (2000) suggest that external assessment can result in an erosion of trust within HEIs as the institution becomes more 'managerial' and paperwork and other bureaucracy increases (in order to 'prove' the learning and teaching matches the quality criteria) without commensurate educational benefits. On the other hand, where such assessments have been introduced, there has been a steady improvement in the resulting scores and in measures such as student retention and graduation.

We have suggested that private HEIs may need to develop a system of institutional audit to support accreditation and subject review to ensure quality and relevance. If so, it is recommended that such systems are based on peer review against institutional and departmental objectives and outcome, rather than 'inspection' against an externally imposed standard. Thernouth (2002) suggests a number of principles that might be applied to any external assessment process that emerges for enterprise activity in higher education. These principles include:

- institutional diversity should be valued;
- the assessment process should encourage HEIs to play to their strengths; and
- criteria should be developed for identifying good practice.

We would add the protection of institutional autonomy and academic freedom to this list.

Subject Review

The World Bank (2004) offers a possible template for programme reviews. Such a template might be usefully used as a basis for quality assessment and audit which is summarized below:

The World Bank suggests academic program review provides an opportunity for an institution to review an academic unit's mission and goals and evaluate the quality of its academic programs, faculty, staff, and students . This in turn will enable it to determine priorities, for example, in relation to changes to the curriculum, investments in resources or the development of systems.

Acadamic review generally starts from a self assessment by the subject team of its strentghs, weaknesses and areas it feels it should develop. The review is generally conducted with the participation of other academics with a knowledge of the subject from outside the institution. These academics read self-evaluation documents, meet students and staff, and may observe classes, other processes and facilties.

According to the World Bank the foci for the review may include:

- o Curriculum quality: goals, their standards and how they are set;

- o Staffing, facilities and resources: student/staff ratios, laboratory space, libraries, ICT;

- o Qualifications of student intake;

- o Qualifications of staff ;

- o Achievement levels and standards of graduates;

- o Employment rates of graduates and employer feedback of their quality;

- o Progression and qualification rates of students (including disadvantaged students);

- o Quality review procedures;

- o Peer and students evaluation of teaching quality;

- o Research output; and

- o Services provided to the HEI, region, country and other bodies.

There are a number of aspects that are relevant to the Ethiopian context that appear to be missing from this list: for instance, there is no specific mention of the relevance of the curriculum or research in relation to the HIV/AIDS challenge. Neither does it look at consultancy and knowledge transfer as areas with which HEI quality systems should be concerned. The issue of relevance is largely missing. There is focus on curriculum, but not on teaching and learning processes, skill development and so on.

Conclusion

Within any quality assurance system there is always the danger that the accountability processes may become overly burdensome. PA Consulting (2000), in a study for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), found that in general the UK educational system has been overburdened by accountability processes, especially those relating to quality. These unnecessary burdens resulted from lack of communication amongst stakeholders; a multiplicity of accountability arrangements; misunderstandings between stakeholders and HEIs; and a decrease in trust among stakeholders in processes leading to a demand for more robust arrangements. The study pointed to a need for collaboration amongst the stakeholders and a greater reliance and trust in HEIs own systems. This implies that private HEIs should work through their association, and collaborate with the public

sector, so that the HEI association, will ensure that the system that is finally developed by the QRAA is sufficiently robust to reassure all its stakeholders, but not to detract unduly from the resources and management energy that support teaching and learning itself.

Whatever quality processes are designed, it is important that the validity and reliability of evidence is considered as an issue. There has been a tendency to value reliability over validity. This has led in turn to a focus on numerical indicators of quality at the expense of quality enhancement. In the Ethiopian context, the analysis above implies that decisions about what 'counts' as evidence of quality taking into account institutional mission should also reflect stakeholder expectations and perceptions. One way of ensuring this is to expect HEIs to conduct surveys of stakeholder satisfaction. However, such surveys cannot provide the whole picture and the evidence that emerges needs careful interpretation. Lessons may be learned from existing studies of the validity of such material: for example, Harvey (2001) found that employer surveys of employability are difficult to interpret since employers do not always think rationally. Similarly, Kwan (1999) in looking at student satisfaction surveys found that non-teaching variables, such as the academic discipline and class size, influence ratings. This is not to suggest that such surveys have no place in a quality system, but rather that other means of assessing the levels and quality of service provided need to be developed alongside them.

Private HEIs are responsible for ensuring that students receive value for money, that they learn and are properly prepared for the world of work and can make an appropriate contribution to society. In the present context, this requirement goes beyond imparting purely academic skills to include the development of ethical values and behaviour and a focus on the development challenges that Ethiopia faces (for example, HIV/AIDS and their social responsibilities as individuals and future employers and managers) and fulfilling the role and promise that private education offers.

The next stage in the process must be to have a broader debate about the issues, outcomes and processes that might be assessed or measured in private HEIs and about what should be the nature of the 'goods' that emerge from such a system. In the end, HEIs need to ensure that whatever system or systems they adopt protects and maintains the central values and purposes of the university, but also meets the legitimate needs of other stakeholders. This means that the definition of quality must relate to higher order moral and educational questions as well as to technical ones.

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Appendix

1. Workforce criteria:
   - o student/staff ratios
   - o student FTE per laboratory
   - o library requirements
   - o IT expectations and requirements

2. Budgetary criteria:
   - o Resources per teaching staff FTE
   - o Resources per student

3. Input criteria
   a. Quality of students admitted
   b. Quality of faculty

4. Output criteria
   - o Expected quality of students graduated
   - o Actual quality of students graduated
   - o Employment data on graduates
   - o Satisfaction of employers with graduates employed

5. Efficiency criteria
   a. Pass through rates
   b. First year failure rates
   c. Success rate of disadvantaged students
   d. Ongoing quality review procedures

6. Teaching quality and output:
   a. Peer evaluation of teaching quality
   b. Student evaluations of teaching quality
   c. Other indications of teaching quality such as performance and success of graduates

7. Research output:
   a. Quality of faculty research
   b. Publications by faculty members
   c. Contributions of the research
   d. Presentations and other external acknowledgements of the quality of research.

8. Service output and contribution
   a. Faculty service to the department, faculty, and university
   b. Service to the country, region, or area.
   c. Other recognition of service such as appointment to international committees, UNESCO service, regional service.