Ethiopian Higher Education Expansion and Persisting Challenges: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Quality higher education plays a significant role in socio-economic development of a nation. Education service quality is one of the important parameters to measure the quality of higher education. The main purpose of this study was conducted to examine the persisting challenges in Ethiopian higher education. To this end, a qualitative research approach was followed. The data for the study were collected via document analysis, focus group discussions and interviews. A total of 89 research papers written on the Ethiopian higher education expansion and its quality were thoroughly reviewed. During the reviewing process, various government policy documents, peer reviewed articles, PhD dissertations, and empirical studies were consulted. The findings of the study revealed that even though different quality improvement programmers have been established to control the quality of Ethiopian higher education, those efforts brought low impact on the country's higher education quality. The shortage of experienced teachers, insufficient supplies of academic resources such as Information Communication Technology [ICT] infrastructure, library facilities, laboratory and workshop equipment, poor dormitory services, lack of adequate classrooms are still persisting challenges of most Ethiopian higher education. It was, therefore, concluded that most Ethiopian higher education institutions provide poor service delivery to students. Based on these findings and conclusions, recommendations were forwarded.

Keywords: Quality Education, Higher Education Expansion, Quality Assurance, Service Quality, Ethiopian Higher Education

A. Introduction

Higher Education Institution (HEI) is one of the most important factors in determining the socioeconomic growth and development of a given nation (Hasbullah &Yusoff, 2017). Higher education plays three vital roles in a knowledge economy, namely, knowledge creation, knowledge diffusion, and knowledge transfer (Đonlagić & Fazlić, 2015). Higher education also plays a central role in the protection of democratic culture and society (Ashcroft, 2004). As a result, most

countries mainly invest in higher education to build a stronger society, end extreme poverty and boost shared prosperity (WB, 2017).

In the history of modern education, Ethiopia possesses an elite education that is connected to the Orthodox Church (Habtamu 2003; Saint, 2004). However, modern higher education in Ethiopia began in the 1950's (Habtamu, 2003). During that period, Ethiopian higher education was characterized as elitist in nature because the majority of students had no access to post-secondary education. Thus, the Gross Enrolment Ratio [GER] to higher education was extremely low as compared to other East African countries. In terms of higher education access, higher education institutions were built in major urban areas. For example, the following table 1.1 shortly summarizes students' lower GER within Ethiopian higher education during the years 1970, 1995 and 2003.

Table 1. Ethiopian Higher Education Access During 1970, 1995 and 2003

SN	Years	GER	Remark
1	1970	0.2%	
2	1995	0.7%	GER has not shown any significant improvement after 25 years
3	2003	1.5%	

Source: World Bank, 2004; Teshome, 2005

Although access to higher education has been extremely low in Ethiopia from 1970 to 2003, there has been a rapid expansion of higher education institutions in different parts of the country over the past fifteen years (Kedir, 2009; Mulu, 2012). One researcher examined the rapid expansion of Ethiopian higher education institutions, based on three major indicators over the past two to three decades, including: (1) increment in the number of higher education (2) high GER as compared with the past two to three decades' GER (3) increment in the number of undergraduate and postgraduate students in different universities. When we look at an increment in the number of Ethiopian higher education institutions, the number of public universities increased from two in 1991 (Tesfaye, 2011) to 36 in 2015 (MoE, 2016). Currently, there are 49 public universities and 128 accredited private HEIs in the country (MoE, 2018). The GER increased from 5.7 percent in 2013 (MoE, 2013) to 10.2 percent in 2014/15 (MoE, 2016) and is expected to reach 15 percent by 2019/20 (MoE, 2016).

Furthermore, the number of undergraduate students increased from 326,318 in 2007/8 to 729,028 in 2014/15 (MoE, 2016). Postgraduate enrollment dramatically increased from 7,355 in 2007/8 to 40,287 in 2014/15 (MoE, 2016). The most recent data released by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education shows that the total number of undergraduate students attending different public universities reached more than 825, 003 (MoE, 2018). This indicates that the annual intake of undergraduate students has increased dramatically. The following table 1.2 summarizes the number of undergraduate and postgraduate students in Ethiopian higher education.

Table 2. Increment in Number of Students in Ethiopian Higher Education

Years	UG Programmes			PG Programmes		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2007/08	263,001	63,317	326,318	6652	703	7355
2014/15	475,971	253,057	729,028	30704	9583	40287
2018	520,177	304,826	825,003			

Source: MoE, 2016; 2018

The expansion of higher education in Ethiopia has brought significant benefits and potential challenges. As an opportunity, many higher education institutions were built in different regions as well as zones of the country. This change seems to have solved the problem of higher education access that was observed over the past two decades. The rapid expansion of higher education in Ethiopia also improved access to the majority of students pursuing their post-secondary education in different programmers (Kedir, 2009; Teshome, 2007). In addition, the opening of new universities and campuses created job opportunities for skilled manpower and local communities, including daily laborers. In the contrary, the imbalance between radical expansion of the country's higher education and resources had mainly affected the overall quality of quality higher education (Solomon, 2012). The most recent prior studies observed that Ethiopian higher education institutions are still characterized by poor service delivery.

For example, in studying the historical challenges and opportunities of Ethiopian higher education, Alemayehu and Solomon (2017) found that the rapid expansion of higher education was still challenged with educational service quality like absence of adequate classrooms, laboratories, dormitories, dining rooms and other facilities. Girmaw (2014) and Elizabeth (2017) in their study stated that when the government aggressively worked on the expansion of higher education, universities struggled with decreasing budgetary allocations per student, shortage of qualified staff and inadequate supply of necessary infrastructure such as furniture, ICT, laboratory chemicals, and library resources.

In this study, related terms, such as quality education, quality assurance, and education service quality, appear in different parts of the paper. In the present study, 'quality education' serves as an umbrella term because it is a broad concept that encompasses quality assurance and education service quality issues. Any higher education cannot play its roles without the quality of education. Quality of higher education is an important determinant of national competitiveness (WB, 2009). Defining and measuring quality in higher education is undoubtedly complex: Sometimes, it is easy to identify it from multidimensional perspectives, including teaching, research, staff-students relationships, services and facilities (Uka, 2014). The quality of education can also come from a combination of well-organized learning processes and the provision of better-quality services to stakeholders, particularly students (Hanaysha, Abdullah and Warokka, 2011).

Education service quality is one of the most determinant factors to ensure the quality of higher education. In educational settings, educational service quality can be seen from various perspectives because educational service quality ranges from various indicators or dimensions. For the purpose of this study, however, educational service quality is considered a measurement of how well Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] provide or offer academic and non-academic administrative services to students in order to enhance their learning. In the past two decades, the higher education service quality has been receiving an increased research attention from scholars and researchers (Al-Dulaimi, 2016; Brochado, 2009, Kontic, 2014; Schuller, Rašticova and Konečny, 2013). However, most education service quality researchers argue that in the higher education sector, education service quality is still a new endeavor as compared to commercial or business sectors (e.g., Sultan and Wong, 2010; Chandra, Ng, Chandra and Priyono, 2018). The main purpose of this study is to:
1. Examine the government's role in improving the quality of Ethiopian higher education services
2. Examine persisting challenges in delivery of educational services.

C. Methods

In this article, the researcher intensively reviewed empirical studies and government documents which are relevant to our research objectives. The researcher used different web searches and contacted high experts in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA] to get pertinent information for the review. The main web searches that the researcher employed in the review mainly include: Addis Ababa University [AAU] online library and Google scholar. Through the AAU online library, the researcher accessed pertinent research materials from well-known databases such as, science direct Elsevier, EBSCO, Project Muse, Educational Resource Centre [ERIC], Springer link, SAGE Journals and the Francis and Taylor Group. In the review, except for very few publications, the most recent studies (published between 2004 and 2021) were thoroughly reviewed. A total of 89 past studies and government documents released by the Ethiopian ministry of education's Educational Annual Abstract and HERQA were thoroughly reviewed. Finally, the researcher employed a qualitative method of data analysis. Initially, the researcher thoroughly reviewed all relevant documents pertaining to Ethiopian higher education quality and persisting challenges. The researcher continued this holistic evaluation of the data multiple times, and assigned labels for emerging themes. They then organized the emerging themes into the major themes which were thematically analyzed.

D. Results and Discussion

In this part, the results and discussions of the review are provided. A detailed discussion will summarize the results in relation to each of the corresponding themes associated with the research questions. In-depth descriptions with data from

the document review are presented next. During the document reviewing process, the following major themes emerged: government roles in improving the quality of Ethiopian higher education, the impact of quality improvement programmers on Ethiopian higher education quality, the rationale for the low impact of higher education quality improvement programmers, and persisting challenges in the delivery of quality educational services.

Government Roles to Improve the Quality of Ethiopian Higher Education

In relation to Ethiopian higher education quality, many studies conducted over the past two decades found the country's higher education to be of poor quality. For instance, Saint (2004) found that Ethiopian higher education institutions face a number of problems related to the quality and relevance of programmers of study. Another study conducted by World Bank [WB] (2004) identified that Ethiopian higher education was characterized as limited in autonomy, a shortage of experienced academic staff, poor service delivery, weak research output and outdated curricula. In addition, the Ethiopian ministry of education also believed the quality problem of the country's higher education. In explaining the decline of quality of higher education, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education in its second Education Sector Development Programme [ESDP] (MoE,, 2002) document stated that enrollment had increased substantially in Ethiopian public universities resulting in over-crowded classrooms, and universities lacked sufficient books and other educational facilities and resources.

In recognizing these challenges, the Ethiopian government has considered it as one of its top priorities in addressing such issues of quality in higher education (MoE, 2005; WB, 2004). Accordingly, the government introduced various quality improvement initiatives and reform programmers. For example, the government of Ethiopia established supporting agencies, such as the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA], a Higher Education Strategic Centre [HESC] and the Educational Quality Improvement Programme [EQUIP], by introducing new courses and curricula, making new funding arrangements, acquiring student contributions by means of cost sharing, building necessary infrastructure, recruiting new staff, improving service quality through the implementation of Business Process Re-engineering [BPR], and developing and procuring teaching materials in the country (Ayalew, Dawit, Tesfaye and Yalew, 2009).

Impact of Quality Improvement Programmers on Ethiopian Higher Education Quality

Many earlier empirical studies have been conducted on higher education quality improvement and reform programmers introduced by the Ethiopian government to control higher education quality. Among those studies, some studies focused on stakeholders' perception towards quality improvement initiatives that were implemented in Ethiopian public higher education. Most of those studies found stakeholders' poor perception towards the quality improvement initiatives

and reform programmers. For instance, in dealing with stakeholder perceptions of service quality improvement in Ethiopian public higher education institutions, Solomon (2012) found that the service quality improvement initiatives were perceived by academic staff and students to be very poor.

In addition, other studies were examined to assess whether the introduced quality improvement programmers and initiatives have brought any significant improvement in quality of Ethiopian higher education. For example, a recent empirical study conducted by the ministry of education in collaboration with educational professionals assured that the activities carried out to improve Ethiopian quality education have brought little positive impact on the quality of HEIs core educational processes in teaching and learning. Most Ethiopian universities have a shortage of sufficient supplies of text and reference books, and a shortage of experienced teachers, laboratory and workshop equipment, including access to ICT facilities (MoE, 2018).

Rationale for Low Impact of Higher Education Quality Improvement Programmers

Higher education quality assurance has become only a recent practice in the history of Ethiopian higher education. Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA] is an autonomous agency established through the Higher Education Proclamation number 351/2003 and is responsible in controlling the quality of both private and public higher education institutions. Higher education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA] controls higher education quality by considering ten focus areas as a benchmark. These are: the institution's vision, mission and educational goals, governance and management system, infrastructure and learning resources, academic and support staff, student admission and support services, programme relevance and curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, student progression and graduate outcomes, research and outreach activities, internal quality assurance (HERQA, 2006a). Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA] has an inclination to control the quality of private higher education and implements quality improvement in public higher education. In public higher education institutions, the external quality audit is conducted by HERQA, and the internal self-evaluation is carried out by the institutions themselves (Abebaw and Aster, 2012).

Many past studies have been conducted to investigate the Ethiopian higher education quality assurance policies, practices and challenges and discussed various reasons for the low impact of such quality improvement programmers in higher education. For example, Abeya (2014) found that there is little evidence of self-initiated quality enhancement activities in the public HEIs and they have no adequate structures, systems, and written policies to assure quality. In the public HEIs, the self-evaluations were symbolically taking place and the results of the evaluations were rarely used in a structured way. In addition, the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA] externally audit the quality of public HEIs,

however, public HEIs did not implement recommendations forwarded in audit reports, and no follow-up action was taken by the quality assurance agency themselves (Abebaw and Aster, 2012). Another study by Misgana (2013) found that the university's poor management system of scarce resources and lack of expertise in quality-related processes in higher education institutions (Tesfaye and Kassahun, 2009) are considered challenges to ensuring the country's higher education quality. Rediet (2015) argues that the existing practice of quality assurance lacks comprehensiveness. He further added that the prevailing quality assurance system suffers from an unequal focus on the quality of core university missions, a lack of a healthy conceptual framework, and disconnected approaches to managing quality.

Persisting Challenges in Delivery of Quality Educational Services in Ethiopian Higher Education

Many prior studies have indicated a poor delivery of necessary educational services in present Ethiopian higher education. Reisberg and Rumbley (2010) observed that Ethiopian higher education quality is constrained by infrastructure. The construction of classroom space, expansion of library collections, the addition of computer labs, and the development of electronic networks lag behind enrollment expansion. In addition, as stated in the last or fifth Education Sector Development Programmeme [ESDP V] document, in spite of massive resources that have been allocated to improve the quality of the teaching and learning process, universities are still reporting insufficient supplies of academic resources such as Information Communication Technology [ICT] infrastructure, library facilities, laboratory, and workshop equipment (MoE, 2015).

E. Conclusion

Ethiopian higher education was found in the era of massive expansion. New universities and campuses have been launched in different regions, zones as well as at woreda levels. However, this expansion has been sustained with very limited educational resources, and shortage of experienced academic and administrative staffs. In Ethiopia, the accreditation of programmers and institutions and institutional audits are being conducted by higher education quality assurance agencies so as to control the quality of higher education. Although different attempts have been made to improve the quality of Ethiopian higher education, the findings of this review revealed that the initiatives and reform programmers which intended to improve the country's higher education quality have brought low impact on Ethiopian higher education quality. As we can notice from this study, most Ethiopian higher education institutions provide poor service delivery to students. Such directly or indirectly affects students' learning outcomes. Based on this conclusion, the researcher makes the following recommendations : (1) Inadequate delivery of educational resources and a shortage of experienced academic and administrative staff are still the pressing challenges for most Ethiopian higher education. Thus, the government in collaboration with the ministry of finance

should make educational and human resources available for institutions which are suffering from a shortage of educational and human resources. (2) The government of Ethiopia in collaboration with the ministry of education [MoE] and quality assurance agencies should closely monitor the quality of each university before launching another new higher education institution. (3) The universities should continuously monitor the quality of their respective institutions through involving stakeholders so as to assure the quality of education. (4) The government of Ethiopia, ministry of education and Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA] should identify institutions that provide quality education and institutions that need further support. (5) The Ethiopian government, universities, ministry of education, quality assurance agencies, and other stakeholders should work collaboratively to improve the country's higher education.

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