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The Functioning of Accreditation in Ethiopia Higher Education

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Abstract

In Ethiopia, the number of private higher education institutions (HEIs) has increased significantly over the past decade. The government of Ethiopia has set up an accreditation system as the main mechanism of overseeing the performance of these private HEIs, .The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA now ETQAA) is the main agency appointed by the government to undertake the accreditation system. This study analyzes the functioning of the accreditation system in Ethiopian higher education with an emphasis on the opinions of private HEIs on the system. To explore and identify the rationale behind the set up of the current accreditation system, the study draws on relevant literature related to the topic. Both quantitative and qualitative study approaches are used. Questionnaires, document analysis and personal communication via email are the main data collection tools. The study shows that the Ethiopian accreditation system is more inclined towards accountability rather than improvement approaches. Moreover, the private HEIs identify delays, stringent standards, a focus on input and a general negative attitude held towards them as major weaknesses of the accreditation system. Nevertheless, the private HEIs concur that the accreditation system has to be implemented in Ethiopia to enhance the contribution of private higher education to the country's development goals.

Key words: Accreditation, private higher education, accountability and improvement

Acronyms

MOE:	Ministry of Education
HERQA:	Higher Education Relevance and Quality Assurance Agency
HEIs:	Higher Education Institutions
FDRE:	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Introduction

The term 'quality assurance' is related to different stakeholders' concern about the overall performance of a given higher education system. Many countries are now making external quality assurance part of their higher education systems, and the experience of developing countries is not an exception to this. In 1991, when Ethiopia made the transition from a socialist to a market-based system, the government undertook certain measures to reform all levels of the education sector. The reforms resulted in significant changes to the country's higher education system. Examples of these reforms include increases in the number of public higher education institutions (HEIs) and the introduction of private HEIs. Currently, there are 21 public and 56 private HEIs (Mekonen & Yemisrach, 2008, p.2). The Ministry of Education (from here on MOE) is responsible for governing both types of HEIs, but has more direct control over public institutions.

The Ethiopian private higher education which started about a decade ago is growing continuously. It accounts for almost a quarter of the students' enrolment in the country (Kedir, 2009). Most of the private HEIs are for-profit and are owned by private investors. These institutions are not entitled to direct funding support from the government unlike their public counter-parts.

In light of the burgeoning demand for access to higher education in Ethiopia, the participation of private HEIs is considered vital. However, the private higher education sector is associated with several problems. There have already been records of malpractices (Mekonen & Yemisrach, 2008). In addition, the public by large prefers the public HEIs, for they are considered to be more legitimate than the private ones (Samuel, 2003). The accreditation system is the primary way the government controls and/or improves private HEIs. Given this background it is possible to infer that Ethiopia needs an accreditation system to balance the need for public control in one hand and the need for institutional development and support in the other hand.

The Ethiopian government established the Higher Education Quality and Relevance Agency (HERQA) in 2003. Prior to 2003, there was no strong built-in system to control quality in the sector (Wondwosen, 2008). HERQA is an independent agency, but it gets funding mainly from the government. In line with this, HERQA has the responsibility of undertaking both institutional and programmatic accreditation, as well as performing quality audits (Wondwosen, 2008, p.155). HERQA's task in relation to accreditation is to make recommendations to the MOE about accreditation applications from private HEIs. The MOE makes the final decision in the accreditation process (Tefaye & Dawit, 2008).

The accreditation system has three phases; pre-accreditation, accreditation and re-accreditation. The procedures in all the three phases are almost the same. The pre-accreditation system in Ethiopia is employed as a license to start a new program (Tefaye & Dawit, 2008). After one year operating with the pre-accreditation permit, an institution can apply for an accreditation permit. The accreditation permit is valid for three years, after the third year the institution has to apply again to get the re-accreditation permit. To date, the accreditation system has only been applied to private HEIs.

After its establishment, the accreditation system (HERQA) has licensed new private HEIs which participated in the higher education market. The private HEIs, however, raised complaints on the procedures followed in the accreditation system. In line with this, this study focuses on the accreditation system of HERQA, with respect to the views of private HEIs. The focus of this study is on the accreditation system of HERQA, with respect to the views of private HEIs. Private HEIs raised complaints about the procedures followed in the accreditation system. It is significant to study this activity as the private sector is in its infancy stage and its importance will be enhanced in the future. As part of this, it is important to know the views of private HEIs as they are the main stakeholders in the accreditation system. If the views of private HEIs can be taken into consideration in the implementation of the accreditation system, the likelihood that the system contributes to the improvement of quality in the country's higher education sector can be enhanced. HERQA has already undertaken research on the views of private HEIs about the accreditation process. The difference in this research is that a conceptual framework has been used to analyze the data.

Research Problem and Questions

Considering the Ethiopian condition, the research problem is formulated as: *how does the current accreditation system function with respect to private HEIs?* Accordingly the research questions below act as guidelines to the study:

1. *What is the rationale behind the accreditation system in Ethiopia?*
2. *How do private HEIs perceive the strengths and weaknesses of the current accreditation system?*
3. *Is the accreditation system in line with the objectives and ambitions of the system?*

Conceptual Framework

The concept of quality assurance is inherent in the system of higher education since its establishment in the medieval period (Van Vught, 1994). However, in most cases academics associate quality assurance with an initiative to develop a more managerial or market based approach in higher education (Brennan, 1997). Similarly, Woodhouse (2004) argues that “as a worldwide phenomenon external quality assurance began in the 1980s” (p.78). Hence, it is associated with the emergence of ‘massification’ in the higher education sector. As noted earlier, clearly organized external quality assurance is a recent trend in Ethiopian higher education system. According to Stensaker et.al. (2008) and Westerheijden et al. (2007) the introduction of an external quality assurance system is also an attempt to strengthen institutional autonomy and institutional capacity for self-government. In Ethiopia, the external quality assurance system is introduced mainly in response to a growing private higher education sector (Mekonen & Yemisrach, 2008, p.9). Thus, this can be interpreted as one way to control private HEIs. Nonetheless, Tesfaye and Dawit (2008) argue that “the ultimate goal of HERQA is to develop organizational culture in higher education that values quality and is committed to continuous improvement” (p.5). Whether the Ethiopian quality assurance system with its present structure is able to address the accountability and/or improvement approach will be commented upon in the following sections of this study.

The way a quality assurance system functions can be influenced by different factors that are related to its components. Such kind of factors can be related to: the way the external quality assurance agency is established, the focus of the quality assurance system, the methods and procedures used by the organization that carries out the review and the direct result of the accreditation system etc. In the framework of this study, the following concepts are identified as core points to analyze the performance of the Ethiopian accreditation system in the eyes of private HEIs. Each of the sub-domains of the accreditation system is discussed to investigate which attributes it must incorporate to emphasize accountability or improvement approaches. The objective here is not to claim that this framework must be taken as the ‘best accreditation system model,’ rather the ideas in the framework will be used as ‘ideal’ criteria to analyze the conditions in the Ethiopian accreditation system. The conceptual framework consists of the model discussed by Van Vught (1994).

Van Vught (1994) recommended a model of ‘multiple accreditation system’ to improve quality in higher education. In doing so, the author combined the main points from the ‘general model of quality assessment’ developed by Van Vught and Westerheijden (1993) (as cited in Van Vught, 1994, p.45). The core points of this conceptual framework are summarized as follows:

The Agent: As per the ‘multiple accreditation model’ the agent at the national level must have a legal status, and as much as possible should be independent from the government. Furthermore, it must focus on overseeing the overall quality assurance process. However, Harvey (2002) argues that even if the agency is granted freedom by legislation its performance could be influenced by the inherent culture of the organization, political agendas, limitations put upon it by government and funding aspects.

As noted earlier, HERQA has a legal status and its role in the accreditation system is limited to the extent of providing recommendation to MOE. Considering the nature of the Ethiopian higher education structure, it can be argued that an independent accreditation agency could not be used as in a well developed higher education systems like the USA. The USA has independent accreditation agencies which have helped the federal government to control quality of HEIs (Harvey, 2002; Ewell, 2007). But the higher education market in USA is decentralized and it has managed to function without strict control from the federal government for a long period of time. Furthermore, the existence of not-for-profit private HEIs is predominant in USA. Thus, the market by itself can help in controlling quality. In comparison to this, the Ethiopian higher education system is characterized with a nascent deregulated market structure dominated with for-profit private HEIs. In addition, Ethiopia lacks strong professional associations which can influence employability of graduates.

Following this, it is possible to argue that in Ethiopia the government should take an active role in the accreditation process at least for some time until the private higher education system can sustain itself. To support this idea, Stensaker and Harvey (2006) argue that: “state owned or initiated accreditation schemes would expect to contribute to national educational objectives, to the spread of neutral and objective information about educational services and suit to particular national characteristics of education sector”(p.67). Likewise, in the Chilean higher education system, which is characterized by the growing size of for-profit private HEIs, the market has failed to provide a measure of social legitimacy to private HEIs (Lemaitre, 2004). Hence, it is possible to claim that in Ethiopia the government must be actively involved in the current stage of the accreditation system. Once the private higher education system develops, then the government can refrain from its involvement in the accreditation system and leave the responsibility of quality assurance to the market. However, this might take many more years. To support this idea, Harvey (2002) affirms:

There is a difficulty of the American accreditation system to move into countries such as Eastern Europe and South America that have experienced a rapid growth of private higher education sector and that a central government endorsed body has usually been set up to ensure private provision meets basic minimum requirements (p.250).

Focus of the accreditation system: In order to have an impact on improvement the accreditation system must focus on input, processes and output elements to reflect the special nature of HEIs. If the system is focusing only on input the likelihood of addressing the improvement agenda will be less. Nevertheless, “accreditation is criticized for focusing only on minimal standards while overlooking the challenge of quality improvement” (Stensaker & Harvey, 2006, p.66).

In the Ethiopian case, HERQA focuses on ‘input’ as criteria for accreditation (Tesfaye and Dawit, 2008, p.18). It can be misleading to claim that a given HEI meets certain quality

standards by only considering input factors. In a research conducted to assess the views of representatives of national quality assurance agencies by Harvey (2006), the representatives emphasized not to give too much weight to performance indicators (which are mainly quantitative) as this could lead to a mere compliance culture that the HEIs could end up adopting. Therefore, focusing not only on inputs but also on output and processes can enhance the level accreditation contribution towards quality improvement.

However, to combine all the elements of input, processes and outputs of HEIs in the accreditation process could be challenging in Ethiopia. For instance, in evaluating the quality of output, 'employability' is one aspect that can be used as a possible indicator. However, the Ethiopian system has not developed ways where employability of graduates could be traced in the accreditation system. In addition, the development of ICT is at its earliest stage. Hence, it is difficult to collect the necessary information about the performance of private HEIs or their graduates. Moreover, the presence of dishonest and fraudulent private HEIs that only focus on making a profit from the higher education market is another challenge facing the Ethiopian higher education system (Tsfaye & Dawit, 2008). Thus the agency has to identify illegitimate providers while undertaking the accreditation process. In line with this, Harvey (2002) notes that agencies which take the responsibility of identifying the legitimate from the dishonest HEIs are in a less likely position to focus on improvement.

Methods and procedures: The methods and procedures in an accreditation process can relate to the standards, the source of information in which the accreditation decision is based, the general procedure the accreditation process has to go through, how the institutional visit is conducted and the manner in which the accreditation results are announced. The core components of the methods and procedures are provided below:

- **The way standards are applied:** There must be a balance between objective and subjective elements of the criteria. It is generally agreed that standards must be structured to encourage new types of programs to enhance the innovativeness of HEIs. Moreover, the standards must be diversified so as to allow the review team to apply their expertise in the evaluation process.
- **Self-evaluation reports:** According to the 'multiple accreditation model', to increase the level of acceptance from the institutes and academics, the accreditation system must focus on the use of a self-assessment document. However, to rely on the self-assessment in the Ethiopian higher education context may be problematic. The Ethiopian private higher education market attracts many new providers. Hence, the chance of getting truthful documents from each private HEI could be difficult. For instance, Tsfaye and Dawit (2008) state that "dishonest private HEIs attempt to argue and waste the time and resources of the agency without fulfilling the minimum criteria set in HERQA guidelines" (p.19).

Similarly to this, the use of the self-assessment document brought negative consequences in Chilean higher education system because it became difficult for the external quality assurance agency to get truthful information from private HEIs (Lemaitre, 2004). Instead, the Chilean quality assurance agency had to use additional data to support the information gathered from the self-assessment report. Since the Ethiopian system has some similar features with that of the Chilean system (both characterized by a previously government controlled systems now moving towards a

growing for-profit private higher education system); it can be well argued that the Ethiopian system has to have some kind of controlling mechanism.

In connection to the use of self-assessment process, Harvey (2002) alleges that if the quality assurance system can be viewed as less risky and more transparent, then there are chances for a more transparent self-assessment process to be undertaken by HEIs. Therefore, building such a kind of relationship with private HEIs needs to be developed in Ethiopia to improve the accreditation process. Supporting this argument, Harvey (2002) also claims that “if the process of self-evaluation is to have an impact on improvement in the long run, it must be backed by established internal procedures and a culture of continuous improvement” (p.258).

- **Procedures:** The procedures may include the review methods used, the reporting mechanisms employed, and the way in which appeal procedures are carried out and the average time the accreditation system takes. It is also related to areas such as how the review team is employing the standards in the accreditation process. Like the standards, the procedures must also be flexible enough to adjust to specific kinds of programs/institutions in order to have a positive impact towards improvement.
- **Institutional visit (Review team process):** Overall the system must be accepted by HEIs as being important. This needs a well developed trust between the external examiners and that of HEIs. As per ‘the multiple accreditation model’ institutional visits by peer reviewers must be a part of the system since such groups could be accepted by institutions as specialists in the field. In the Ethiopian case, the accreditation system allows the participation of experts from notable private HEIs in the review teams. Because of the lack of influential professional associations, the application of the peer review mechanism in Ethiopia requires further developments to be made in the current higher education system. Pertinent to what has been argued against the mechanism of peer review during an institutional visit Harvey (2002) identifies the following major limitations:
 - The peer reviewers attempt to relate what they hear (and sometimes see) to the self-assessment document;
 - Most of the time they are provided with inadequate documentation and less time to process the application process;
 - Peer reviewers are encouraged to ask questions but they are not trained as investigators. (p. 257).

One can see the implications of the above listed limitations especially in a system dominated with for-profit higher education. As noted earlier, the Ethiopian accreditation system should be able to encourage participation of private HEIs. Likewise, the institutional review team process should not be done just as one way of issuing licensing, and identifying fraudulent providers. It should also be used to further improve the dialogue between the government and HEIs in Ethiopia.

- **Reporting mechanism (Information service):** The ‘multiple accreditation model,’ recommends that a reporting mechanism must be built into the accreditation system to enhance improvement; however, this must not be done with the intention of comparing or criticizing the institutions. Furthermore, summarized information must be provided to the public with the detailed part to be given to the applicant institute.

In the case of Ethiopia, the reporting mechanism could encourage those institutions that have performed well (those which have secured the accreditation status), but may have negative consequences on those institutions with negative accreditation outcome. Besides this, it has to be noted that the information that the reporting mechanism provides is currently the only mechanism available to help the public know about the legitimacy of new HEIs. However, some private HEIs in Ethiopia complained about the condition where accreditation decisions were announced to the public before institutions were given a chance to apply for an appeal (Eleni, 2003).

The outcome of the accreditation process: the final element in the conceptual framework for accountability versus improvement approach is related to the outcome of the accreditation system. If the outcome is restricted to Yes/No output, it fails to achieve the goal of providing information to the public. In general the outcome of the accreditation process can have significant consequences on new providers that are based on tuition and fees. The accreditation outcome also influences HEIs' chance to develop certain programs, and have implications on their reputation in the higher education market.

To enhance improvement, the 'multiple accreditation model', states that the outcome of the accreditation process must not be directly associated with funding allocation decisions; as this would develop a culture of compliance to be adopted by HEIs. In relation to this, it should be pointed out that the accreditation system in Ethiopia is not associated with any funding allocation decision. However, the results of the accreditation practice seem to have paramount effects on the likelihood of private HEIs to attract students. For instance, the higher education proclamation states that the degrees offered by private HEIs cannot be accepted in the job market unless the program has accreditation status (FDRE, 2003). This may indicate that the outcome of accreditation may have influences on the employment opportunities of graduates from such type of institutions.

To sum up, Van Vught (1994) asserts that this model takes in to account the special nature of HEIs and the fact that HEIs are involved in both directions of the 'pure search for knowledge' and 'providing service to the society'. Hence, if the elements discussed in the framework are adopted by a given accreditation system, it can enhance the likelihood of emphasizing the improvement approach. The following table provides a summary of the core points discussed above. It shows the attributes of the parts of the accreditation mechanism that could lead to an emphasis either on accountability or improvement approaches. The table will be used as a point of departure for the analysis of the Ethiopian accreditation system in the data analysis section.

Table 1: Central Characteristics of a Control Oriented and Improvement Oriented Accreditation System

Central Characteristics of an accountability and improvement oriented accreditation system		
Approaches	Accountability	Improvement
Domains		
Agent	- Government Owned - Young	-Independent (formed by voluntary associations) -Work with HEIs -Matured
Focus	- Input -Licensing(Identifying legitimate providers)	- Input processes and output - Trust built in the system
The methods & procedures		
<i>Standards</i>	Uniform	-Diversified (to encourage new types of programs).
<i>Self-assessment process</i>	- Not in use	-Central in the process
<i>Procedure</i>	- Bureaucratic	-flexible
<i>Review team process</i>	-Following strict guidelines	- As a chance for opening open dialogue with the HEIs. - Specialists in the field
<i>Reporting mechanism</i>	-With purpose of Ranking HEIs	-Informing the public and HEIs -No direct relationship to funding ,ranking HEIs
The outcome of the accreditation process	-Yes/No(specified)	- with detailed information to the institutes
The overall system	- Externally imposed	-supported with internal culture.

Source: Modified and elaborated from Van Vught and Westerheijden (1993) as cited in Van Vught, 1994, p.45)

Research Methodology

For this study, the researcher employed questionnaires, document analysis, informal discussion and personal communication via email as the main data collection tools. The study used both primary and secondary data sources. However, the secondary data constituted the major part of the data; it was obtained from a research report from HERQA’s pre-accreditation, accreditation and re-accreditation unit. The purpose of the research conducted by HERQA (used as the source of the secondary data) was to assess the ‘views of private HEIs about the current pre-accreditation, accreditation and re-accreditation procedures’ (Mekonen & Yemisrach, 2008). The findings of HERQA’s research provided information about the views of private HEIs.

By using this source as secondary data, the researcher identified the specific findings that were relevant to answer the basic research questions. However, as it is difficult to rely only on the findings of the agency’s research, the small scale data collection procedure was held to better understand the private HEIs views about the current accreditation system. A potential

similarity in the objectives of HERQA's study with that of this study can be noticed (see the research questions). However, as stated earlier in this study an effort was made to apply a particular conceptual framework during the analysis of both primary and secondary data. Furthermore, accreditation standards and procedures of HERQA, other internal reports of the agency and the higher education proclamation of 2003 (FDRE, 2003) were used as secondary sources of data. Previous studies with themes related to Ethiopian accreditation system have also been referred as secondary sources of data. Hence, it is possible to say that this combination of different sources of data enhanced the reliability of the data, it also helps to combine and cross-check information from the various sources which have relevance to the research topic.

Both quantitative and qualitative study approaches were used in this study. HERQA's research mainly followed a quantitative approach. HERQA's research was considered as a comprehensive source of secondary data since it included a significant number (42 out of 56) of the private HEIs offering bachelor degree programs.

The primary data collected by followed mainly a qualitative approach to collect the data. To collect primary data, questionnaires with more open ended questions were administered to 10 private HEIs which offer bachelor degree and above. The questionnaires addressed issues related to quality, the set up of quality assurance systems, the accreditation procedures and strengths and weaknesses of the accreditation system as viewed by the private HEIs. Descriptive statistical methods were used to describe the basic features of the data in the study and then percentage and narrative accounts were used to analyze the secondary data. In addition, an attempt was also made to critically investigate and read the responses included in the primary and secondary data using the conceptual framework.

Analysis of data about Ethiopian accreditation system

In this part the key findings of the study are presented using the main points of the conceptual framework. To discuss the procedures in the accreditation process in more detail; in the first stage, the applicant private HEI makes an application to MOE, the ministry then sends it to HERQA (FDRE, 2003). HERQA assess the application and forward its recommendations to the ministry. Then, MOE issues accreditation permit within 15 days after the recommendation has been forwarded by HERQA (FDRE, 2003, article 63). The recommendation given by HERQA is based on the information gathered from: application documents presented by the applicant private HEI, institutional visit, and discussions held and reports compiled by its external review team. To date, the accreditation system has not incorporated self-assessment documents. Nevertheless, the agency states that it is planning to apply the self-assessment documents at least in the re-accreditation stage (Tsefaye & Dawit, 2008).

The analysis of primary data gathered through questionnaires from selected private HEIs, and secondary data collected and analyzed from internal documents of HERQA and their research on 'The Views of private HEIs about the Current Accreditation System' show the following patterns with regards to the Ethiopian accreditation system.

The Agent: HERQA is legally independent agency tasked with the responsibility to give recommendations to MOE regarding the accreditation applications. However, the analysis of

the data showed that HERQA enjoys high levels of power in making the accreditation decision. Thus, it is possible to claim that HERQA is the main organ responsible for the accreditation process. In relation to the set up of the accreditation system, the private HEIs opted for professional or other independent accreditation associations to oversee the accreditation system. There was also one private HEI that was reluctant to comment about HERQA as it was perceived as a governmental agency. The following graph shows the number of applications for accreditation HERQA has undertaken dating from July 2007 to June 2008 (12 working months of HERQA). The report states that the agency was able to accredit more programs than the proposed number in the annual plan.

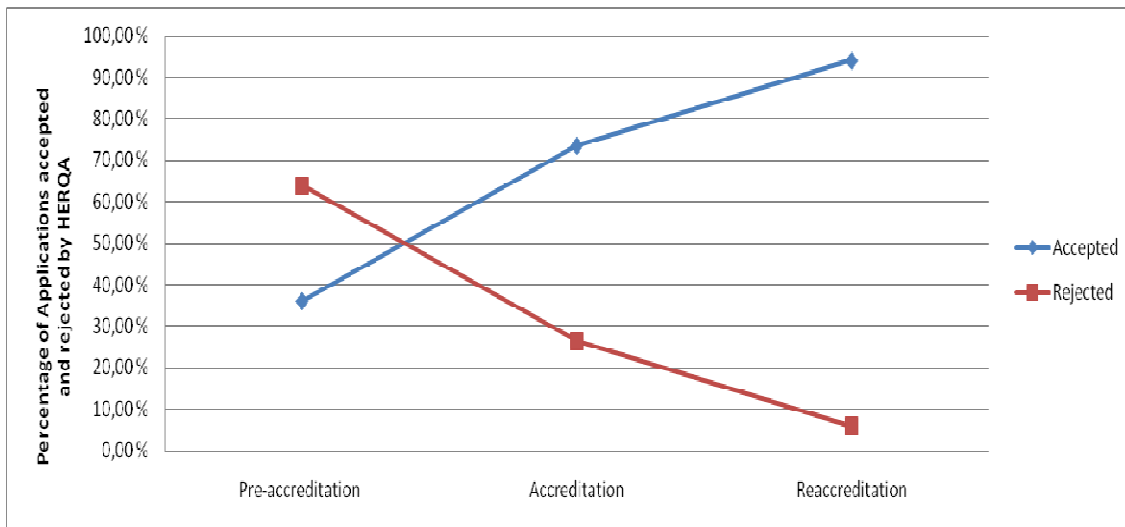


Figure 1.1 Percentage of applications for Pre-accreditation, Accreditation and Re-accreditation Accepted and Rejected by HERQA in the period beginning from July 2007 – June 2008. Source: HERQA Report, 2008 (p.7) (original document in Amharic)

The figure shows that a majority of applicants for the pre-accreditation had negative outcomes. As affirmed in the report, HERQA assumes this as the strength of the overall accreditation system in controlling private HEIs (HERQA, 2008). When it comes to the accreditation and re-accreditation stages, majority of the applicants had a chance to get their applications accepted. Once an institution gets the pre-accreditation status it seems that its chances of getting the accreditation or re-accreditation status are less difficult when compared to the initial stage of the accreditation. This may lead to the interpretation that the agency develops more trust in the capacity of the applicant institutions at the later stages. The conceptual framework also points to the trust element as one of the factors that enhance the improvement capacity of the accreditation system.

The focus: The accreditation system employed both professional (subjective) and standard (objective) focus viewpoints. However, the process follows more of a structured assessment procedure. Moreover, the study shows that the criteria used in the accreditation system are focused more on the input element than the other elements of process and output. The private HEIs have a negative view about the implementation of the accreditation system on solely private HEIs.

The analysis of the guidelines provided by HERQA revealed that while assessing the available number of qualified staff, the agency attempts to find details for employment conditions like the academic rank, release from the last employer and related documentation to certify the qualifications. One can not underestimate the usefulness of this kind of mechanism, for there have been some incidences of providing false documentation in the Ethiopian higher education system (Tsfaye & Dawit, 2008). However, it can also be argued that HERQA has gone too far in this direction and is becoming quite intrusive in the activities of private HEIs. This may negatively affect the agency's venture towards quality improvement. Nonetheless, in the future there are chances that the system could sustain itself, and the mutual trust between the agency and private HEIs could be enhanced. The plan to use a self-assessment document at least in the re-accreditation stage could be an indication of this progress.

The methods and procedures: The analysis of the data showed that the majority of the private HEIs were dissatisfied with the methods and procedures used in the accreditation system. Accordingly, highly overrated standards, elongated application process and insufficient information provision were identified as the major weaknesses. For instance, the private HEIs expressed that the institutional visit procedure did not allow them to have an open relationship with external reviewers. Though the agency states that it has accomplished more than it has planned for the year 2008, the respondent private HEIs pointed out the delayed application process as one major weaknesses of the system.

The annual report of HERQA for the duration of July 2007 to June 2008 has also shown that the average time the accreditation processes took for each program was 5.5 months (HERQA, 2008). This may show that there is a delay in providing accreditation services to the private HEIs. If the accreditation system is delayed, it creates a challenge on the day-to-day activities of private HEIs. This delayed accreditation approach does not seem to go in line with the agency's objective of enhancing and improving quality in the private higher education system. As reflected in the conceptual framework, problems like this will have an adverse impact on the capacity of the accreditation system towards an improvement approach. Moreover, the fact that the system is not based on an internal quality assurance mechanism is identified as a limitation.

The outcome of the accreditation process: the study shows that the consequences of the accreditation system are highly significant, for it can determine the chances of private HEIs to offer legitimate programs. The other important finding was that the outcome of the accreditation did not have a direct link with funding or ranking of institutions. However, the outcome of the accreditation process is circulated in widely accessible media which can be comparable to ranking mechanisms' in other countries.

One interesting finding is that despite the many weaknesses identified above, private HEIs believe that the accreditation system must be implemented to enhance the overall development of the country's higher education system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In general, considering the objectives envisioned by HERQA and the stage of development of the accreditation system at present, it can be argued that the system has played a crucial role in the Ethiopian private higher education. The study shows that there is an increasing public concern about quality related to the fast growth in the number of private HEIs. The results of

the study showed that the accreditation system was able to license new institutions which participated in the higher education market. This is important because the government of Ethiopia needs the participation of private HEIs in order to expand the current low access rate. Furthermore, the agency's identification of some of the weaknesses in the current procedures is a good indicator that shows its effort to align its services to the current conditions in the higher education sector.

However, it seems that achieving the improvement objective of the accreditation system is difficult with the current procedures used. The analysis of the data shows that the accountability objective appears to be given more focus in the accreditation than the improvement one. To begin with the accreditation agency is not independent from the government, and this may lead it to focus more on accountability. Though the agency assumes a central role in the accreditation process, the fact that it is affiliated to the government has also led the private HEIs to consider it as wholly as a state-run agency. Next, the legitimizing role of the accreditation of HERQA also makes it likely that the accountability agenda will dominate. As Harvey (2002) argues, agencies that take the responsibility of identifying legitimate from dishonest HEIs are in a less likely position to focus on improvement. This is a challenge faced by HERQA. In line with the literature reviewed, one can notice that accreditation systems will have a chance to have a positive impact on improvement if they can focus on innovative programs, emphasize student competencies and build continuous communications with HEIs. Taking these points into consideration, it can be said that there is a good opportunity for HERQA to adjust its mechanisms so that it can emphasize on the improvement approach in the future. However, it is better to refrain from giving standardized suggestions as ways to improve the accreditation system in Ethiopia rather it is better to leave the space for open for more discussions about the possible ways to improve the current accreditation system. The main concern is on how to balance the accountability and improvement approaches in the accreditation system.

There are many possible mechanisms that can be used by the agency for enhancing the improvement approach of the accreditation system. Perhaps the establishment of an independent agency can be beneficial in the future. In this way, the state can focus on more of a developmental approach by delegating the quality control role to the independent agencies. The perception of the private HEIs about HERQA as the main controlling governmental authority should also be changed in the future. For this to happen, HERQA has to be viewed as independent from the government and that it is meant to provide support to the current higher education system in Ethiopia. For instance applying the accreditation system to public HEIs in the future might improve the cynical view private HEIs have towards the current accreditation system thereby enhancing the collaboration to be gained from the private HEIs. It might be good to include detailed information in the refusal/ acceptance letters of the accreditation process to have open communication with the private HEIs in the future.

In conclusion, the Ethiopian accreditation system can be labeled as centralized. It was also found out that there have been attempts to include the help of professionals in the process. From the points discussed so far, it can also be inferred that the system is moving towards adjusting its mechanisms to the specific conditions in the country. Furthermore, with regards to the accountability/improvement dichotomy, the belief that accreditation cannot result on improvement is challenged in this study. With more trust developed by HERQA on the capacity of private HEIs in the second (accreditation) stage, it looks like the Ethiopian

accreditation system may have the opportunity to have an impact on improvement in the coming years.

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