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## **The Perceptions of Students Regarding Quality Improvement: Implications for Quality Assurance In Ethiopian Higher Education System**

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### **Abstract**

Quality Assurance is a world-wide phenomenon that urges Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to be accountable and reflect improvement in all their activities. There are several methods to Quality Assurance, which look into at the organizational structure rather than that of individual activities. The leadership in Ethiopia, as in many other countries in the developing world, is attempting to integrate Quality Assurance into its higher education system. The primary focus in this study is on the concept of quality as fitness for purpose, internal quality assurance, and external quality assurance systems to look into the developments in the quality assurance regime in the institutions. The study primarily employed questionnaires, to collect data from graduating students of the six public and private HEIs. The study attempted to address a basic research question: What are the practices and improvements observed by students in the HEIs following HERQA's institutional quality audits? There are two principal reasons for collecting feedback from students. The first is to enhance the students' experience of learning and teaching and the second is to contribute to the monitoring and review of quality and standards. The emphasis here, therefore, is on quality assurance. An analysis of the data, which embraced both quantitative and qualitative, implied that the prospective graduating students in the sample institutions seemed to be unconvinced with respect to the quality improvement in regard to the different aspects of quality. HEIs should emphasize heavily on the internal quality assurance practices. The study unfolded a range of opportunities and challenges to the development of quality assurance and quality culture. The study has implication for both theoretical and practical worlds of Ethiopian HE where quality assurance is in its nascent stage and resources are limited.



**Key words:** quality; quality assurance; external quality assurance; internal quality assurance; perceptions

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background and Rationale**

The Ethiopian Higher Education Sector is in the process of rapid growth. As different government data on Ethiopian public education indicated, Ethiopia is currently undertaking major public higher education expansion. To this end, at present there are 35 government higher education institutions (MOE, 2015). This is a rise from 2 in 1991 and from 8 in 2005 (Rayner and Tesfaye, 2005; Teshome, 2007). According to the Education Statistics Annual Abstract (MOE, 2015), in the year 2006 E.C the total undergraduate enrolment in government and non-government institutions is 593,574. The same document pointed out that in 2006 E.C (2013/14), the total postgraduate enrolment in both sectors reached 33,882.

The Ethiopian higher education system has also seen a dramatic change in the form of the unanticipated emergence and expansion of Private HEIs. HERQA (2011) noted that, there were virtually none fifteen years ago and recently there are more than 70 privately owned colleges that offer degree programs. The figure (2013/14) by MOE (2015) indicated that non-government HEIs took 15.2% of the total enrollment in undergraduate program.

It seems that the Ethiopian higher education has started changing fundamentally, from elite and exclusive, to mass and inclusive provision. Thus, this fundamental change coupled with facilities and competencies of lecturers and students dictates the urgent need for the assurance of quality and standards. Academic standards are not private matters to be left to few concerned individuals or groups.



In line with assuring quality, Harvey and Green (1993) conceive quality as a multifaceted notion which is value-laden in nature. There are widely differing conceptualizations of quality in use (Schuller, 1991). Harvey and Green (1993) in their discussion of the relationship between quality and standards in higher education identify five perceptions or notions of quality noticeable in higher education: quality as *exceptional* (linked with excellence and elitism), as *perfection* or consistency, as *fitness for purpose*, as *value for money*, and as *transformative* (interpreted as 'the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge') (Harvey, 1995; see also Harvey *et al.*, 1992). Each of these notions of quality has implications for the methods and approaches used to measure the desirable outcomes emanate from it. This study deals mainly with 'fitness for purpose'. Quality, as fitness for purpose, sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, needs or desires.

As a result of the diversity in views about quality and higher education, a variety of systems and approaches have been developed for monitoring quality of different kinds and at different levels, displaying varied emphasis and priorities (Tam,2001). According to Tam, these monitoring systems include: quality control, quality assurance, quality audit, and quality assessment and indicator systems. The emphasis in this study, therefore, is quality assurance though the different systems are highly interrelated and in some cases overlapping.

The Ethiopian government along with the effort to speed up the expansion also appears to give more attention to quality and value for money. As a result a government agency acting as a national watchdog of quality in the higher education emerged in 2003. The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) brought into existence mainly in response to the rapid growth in tertiary education both in the public and private sectors and the resultant anecdotal decline in the quality of higher education. This required the establishment of an autonomous agency with sole responsibility for setting and monitoring standard (HERQA, 2011).

Since its formation, HERQA, as it has been stated in its different publication series, has been engaged in institutional quality audit, quality assurance training to higher education personnel, and research activities. In addition, HERQA has a system whereby it can undertake unannounced visits, and



follow up visits following submission of a quality enhancement plan by institutions. All private higher education institutions are subject to HERQA's accreditation process. Therefore, it is assumed that HERQA for the last twelve years has been instrumental in encouraging and assisting the growth of an organizational culture in Ethiopian HEIs that value quality and is committed to continuous improvement.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

According to The World Bank (2008) many countries that experienced a doubling or tripling of tertiary enrollments in the recent past have eroded quality and are undermining the contribution of higher education to growth. Ethiopia may not be a nation to escape such a criticism. In line with this the government has put in place a structure for external quality assurance, HERQA was established in 2003. Cognizant of the situation, ESDP IV (MOE, 2010) suggested that one major new emphasis will be the concern for improving the quality and the employability of university graduates. Echoing a similar feeling the Growth and Transformation Plan (MOFED, 2010) indicated that the key priority in the higher education system during the five year plan will be to ensure the systems' quality and relevance. Thus, magnifying the duties and roles of HERQA has to institutionalize quality assurance system in the Ethiopian higher education sector to ascertain quality. The main purpose of this study, therefore, is to find out the status of quality and quality assurance regime from students' perspective in Ethiopian HEI system.

## **1.3. Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. appraise the status of quality and quality assurance regime within HEIs from students' perspectives; and
- ii. map out some major opportunities and challenges in institutionalizing quality assurance regime in HEI system.



#### **1.4. Basic Research Questions**

- i. What are the perceived evidences of change in enhancing quality and formalizing quality assurance system and mechanisms in HEIs?
- ii. What are the good practices and improvements observed in HEIs following HERQA's institutional quality audits?
- iii. What are the lessons for future improvement to elaborate formal quality assurance system in Ethiopian higher education sector?

#### **1.5. Significance of the Study**

Research that explores the effectiveness of different systems, their applicability to the changing world of higher education and their impact on teaching and learning, and the abilities of students is urgently needed. With this milieu, studying the status of quality and quality assurance of the Ethiopian HE system is so important for a number of reasons among other things the following.

- It appears that the issue of quality and quality culture in Ethiopian HEIs context has not been researched at all adequately. Therefore, this study may encourage others to produce better and more in depth studies on the issue by generating research-based data.
- The findings may provide a useful piece of information on the status of the HEIs with regard to pursuing quality improvement, and may thus contribute in raising public awareness.
- It may help to lay the ground for a more detailed and integrated planning and implementation of quality assurance activities in HEIs by facilitating policy dialogue and informing decision-making process.

#### **1.6. Delimitation of the Study**

This study is not a quality audit of the HEIs in question. Rather this study mainly focuses on the examination of the nature and developments of internal quality assurance in Ethiopian HEIs from students' perspectives. The study covered only six HEIs (three public and three private were selected) and the generalizability of the study is limited to these HEIs.



### **1.7. Limitations of the Study**

The prime sources of information were students. The purpose and procedures of the research were fully explained and stated to the subjects at the outset. Maximum efforts have been exerted to secure the confidence and cooperation of the institutional leaders and managers at different positions. Nevertheless, there were some conditions beyond the control of the researcher that may affect on the conclusions of the study and their application to other situations. These are:

- Cooperation on the part of some deans and departments heads to reach the target groups was minimal.
- Errors in the rating scales such as halo effect, generosity error, central tendency error and severity error.
- Administrative policies that rarely allowed access to statistical data.
- The rate of returns was not always satisfactory.

### **1.8. Operational Definitions**

**Quality:** Quality in this study is taken as fitness for purpose. Quality, as a relative concept, is about being measured against criteria; it is not an end in itself, but a means by which the end product or service is judged as being up to or not up to standard. Quality must do what is claimed for it, and do what its customers expect of it. In other words it must be fit for purpose.

**Quality Assurance:** Quality assurance is about consistently meeting standards (purposes or goals) specifications or getting things right first time, every time. It involves establishing that there are policies, systems and procedures (structures) in place to ensure that objectives are met consistently and reliably, and that they are periodically reviewed.

**Perception:** Perception is the way, in which something (in this research quality) is regarded, understood or interpreted and makes judgment about it.



## **2. Research Design and Methodology**

The method in this inquiry was descriptive, particularly employed survey: to assess the status of the current state of affairs of quality enhancement involvement in HEIs from students' perspective, and reflect on the opportunities and challenges in institutionalizing quality assurance regime in Ethiopian higher education system. The survey which entailed, both qualitative and quantitative approaches, attempted to provide analysis and development of generalization on the subject.

### **2.1. Sources of Data**

The major sources of data were the HEIs sample which runs degree programs. In this regard the primary sources were the prospective graduating students and to some extent the offices responsible for quality assurance and documents, and reports of the sample institutions related with quality matters. The secondary sources were quality audit reports by HERQA.

### **2.2. Sampling Procedure**

Whilst this study is planned, as per the information secured, HERQA has undertaken 26 external institutional quality audits and has produced reports for 10 public universities and 11 private higher education institutions. Thus, the targeted HEIs are all from those whose reports were published and disseminated earlier. As a result the three public institutions purposely identified are Jimma University, Bahir Dar University and Arba Minch University. They are chosen by considering size, programs, facilities, number of staff and students, geographical distribution. They are among those who are audited earlier by HERQA.

Regarding the private ones the same procedure was employed. Consequently, Unity University, St. Mary's University College (now a university) and another university college were selected from the list of those private HEIs that HERQA audited. These three institutions appear among well known in the country and satisfied the recent HERQA's quality review process and allowed to register new students. Moreover, the institutions seem to be well established in terms of programs, number of





students, facilities, etc. Nevertheless, later on, the university college whose name is not mentioned above, due to ethical reason, was replaced by Africa Health College due to the fact that data secured via the questionnaires from this institution found to be highly skewed and inflated and nullified. The respondents there seemed to be uninterested to respond conscientiously and objectively.

Two to ten prospective graduating students from each department (depending on the number of departments in each institute) were considered, six head of quality assurance offices (one from each institution) and the quality audit reports were also consulted in the study.

### **2.3. Instruments**

The primary data-gathering device that was found to be useful in this study is questionnaire. The questionnaire is adapted from Sallis (2002), where the details are given in 3.2 and is closed-form type with major divisions' in terms of content, was administered to prospective graduating students in the selected HEIs in order to secure data generally on the current state of affairs of quality and quality assurance. In addition to the experts and authorities comments and feedback concerning the content validity, a pilot test was conducted to check the consistency of the questionnaire as result .924 Cronbach's Alpha recorded. Thus, the instrument appears to maintain some level of quality since its representativeness of the content is judged to be satisfactory and high reliability secured. Discussions with quality assurance office heads (hereafter referred as quality managers) of the sample institutions carried out to determine the status of quality assurance practices. Documents especially HERQA's external audit reports were studied and analyzed to describe and evaluate the prevailed practices in HEIs in quality assessments and enhancement that may serve as starting point to inquiry the changes since then.

### **3. Presentation and Analysis of Data**

The presentation and analysis of data begins by looking at the profile of the sample HEIs, then insights about the perceived evidences by students of change in creating quality culture and establishing quality assurance.



### **3.1. Profiles of the Sample HEIs**

#### **3.1.1. Jimma University**

Jimma University (JU), as a fully-fledged university, was established in 1999 through the amalgamation of the local College of Agriculture and the Institute of Health Sciences. JU is a large-sized, public university, located in Jimma City, Oromia Region, with an enrolment in 2005 E.C., of about 18,934 (15,445 male and 3,489 female) regular degree students. JU aspires to be the best leading developmental University in Africa that produces competent professionals responsive to societal needs.

#### **3.1.2. Arba Minch University**

Arba Minch University is situated in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR) and few km (5) from the business center of Arba Minch town. The University was established in 2004 in the premises of and including the former Arba Minch Water Technology Institute (AWTI), which was founded in 1986. The University is a medium-sized, relatively full-breadth, public university, with an enrolment in 2004 E.C. 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of about 14,243 (10,941 male and 3,302 female) regular degree students with very few post graduate students. Arba Minch University aspires to be one of the leading Higher Education Institutions in the country and a center of excellence in the area of water resources in Eastern Africa.

#### **3.1.3. Bahir Dar University**

Bahir Dar University (BDU) is located in Bahir Dar city, Amhara Region at the southern shore of Lake Tana. The University was inaugurated in 2000 when the former Bahir Dar Teachers College and Bahir Dar Polytechnic Institute joined together to become the education and engineering faculties, respectively, of the new university. The University is a large-sized, public university, with an enrolment in 2005 E.C. of about 19,978 (14,766 male and 5,212 female) regular degree students both in undergraduate and post graduate programs. BDU aspires to become one of the ten premier research universities in Africa in 2025.



#### **3.1.4. Unity University**

Unity University is a small-sized, private university with approximately 5402 (2290 male and 3112 female) degree students (regular and extension). Unity University is the first full-fledged privately owned university in Ethiopia with a status granted by the Ministry of Education. The University aspires to become the best possible private University that can provide quality education and research for better use by citizens who are engaged with the University to acquire education and achieve their dream for a better life and a well developed country.

#### **3.1.5. St. Mary's University College**

Founded in 1998, St. Mary's University College (SMUC), now a university, is a development of St. Mary's Language School which was established in Addis Ababa in 1991. SMUC is, a small-sized, private university college, in 2005 E.C enrolled about 4110 (3610 undergraduate and 500 postgraduate) degree students in regular and extension programs. SMUC aspires to become among the leading higher education centers of academic excellence in East Africa in teaching-learning, research, publications and community services, and contribute its share especially to Ethiopia's development.

#### **3.1.6. Africa Health College**

Africa Health College, a private institution, appears to be the smallest HEI as far as the sample institutions are concerned with approximately 1200 degree regular and extension students is located in Addis Ababa, near railway station (Leghar). Africa Health College aspires to expand all programs to MSc. and PhD levels in the near future and will try its best in training qualified professionals which play an important role in delivering quality health care as model in East Africa.

### **3.2. The Perceptions of Students Regarding Quality Improvement**

Brennan et al. (2003) argue that there are two principal reasons for collecting feedback from students. The first is to enhance the students' experience of learning and teaching and the second is to contribute to the monitoring and review of quality and standards. In addition, they found that there were



seven further purposes behind the collection of student data, ranging from ensuring the effectiveness of course design and delivery to contributing to staff development. The emphasis here, therefore, is on quality assurance. For Harvey (2003b) feedback from students is more action-oriented. It provides internal information to guide improvement and external information for potential students and other stakeholders, including accountability and compliance requirements. Overall, there appear to be six main reasons why feedback is collected (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007). Feedback can: (i) Provide information for improvement, (ii) Provide information for prospective students, (iii) Provide information for current students, (iv) Address accountability issues, (v) Provide benchmarking information, (vi) Be used to make comparisons between and within institutions. Generally, quality policies have to be learning-oriented and should be centered on the student experience (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2002).

Hence, a questionnaire entitled "*Survey of Students Opinions on Quality Improvement*" entailing 38 items of which 35 items are incorporated in the scale is distributed to a sample of the prospective students where they are required to evaluate the improvement of the aspects of quality in the scale as *excellent, good, fair* or *poor*. The alternatives are weighed 4,3,2,1 going from excellent to poor. The scale contains 6 sub-divisions namely:

- A. Advice and Guidance and Access.
- B. Learning Resources.
- C. Social and Extra-Curricular.
- D. Physical Environment and Resources.
- E. Learning and Teaching.
- F. Students.

In the advice and guidance and access sub-division quality issues related with reception, signs in the campus, ramps and lifts for disabilities, information and guidance service and career guidance are included. The learning resources sub-division contained quality items related with library, laboratory facilities and computer facilities. In the social and extra-



curricular sub-category issues concerning sport facilities, recreational facilities and opportunities for students to organize their own activities were incorporated. In physical environment and resources sub-division items focusing on buildings, facilities suitability, visual aids and learning aids, learning environment, health and safety policies and communal areas are mentioned. The learning and teaching sub-division involved quality issues reflecting on teaching and learning strategies, learning methods, student centered methods, encouragement, up to datedness and relevance of the content, student feedback, systems for review and evaluation, assessment and grading system, approach of the teaching staff toward students and advising. The students' sub-division contained quality issues related with student information books, rapport between staff and students, practice that keep students informed about development, follow up of students progress and attendance and tutorial provision. Lastly, 3 questions out of the scale were presented to the students to give their general remarks concerning quality improvement. The questions are:

1. How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?
2. What is your overall impression of the quality of education at this institution?
3. If you could start over again, would you like to go to the same institution, you are now attending?

Student respondents' profile is illustrated in Table 1 indicating institution and sex.



**Table 1: Student Respondents Profile by Institution and Sex**

			Sex		Total
			Male	female	
<b>Institution</b>	<b>St. Mary's</b>	Count	16	27	43
		% of Total	5.7%	9.6%	15.4%
	<b>Africa</b>	Count	21	24	45
		% of Total	7.5%	8.6%	16.1%
	<b>Unity</b>	Count	18	11	29
		% of Total	6.4%	3.9%	10.4%
	<b>Arba Minch</b>	Count	55	4	59
		% of Total	19.6%	1.4%	21.1%
	<b>Bahir Dar</b>	Count	32	9	41
		% of Total	11.4%	3.2%	14.6%
	<b>Jimma</b>	Count	59	4	63
		% of Total	21.1%	1.4%	22.5%
<b>Total</b>		<b>Count</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>280</b>
		<b>% of Total</b>	<b>71.8%</b>	<b>28.2%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The students' responses are summarized in the following table.

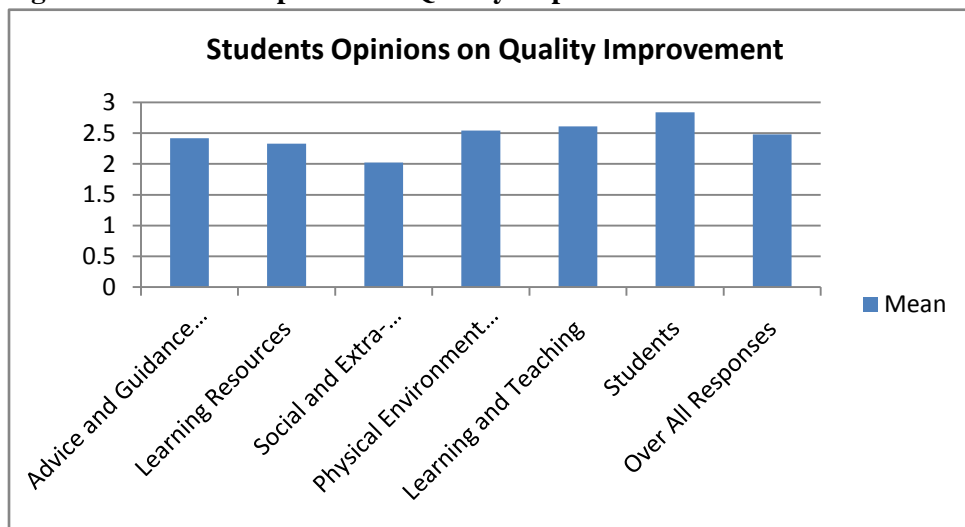


**Table 2: Students' Opinions on Quality Improvement**

Quality Indicators (Sub-divisions)	Mean
Advice and Guidance and Access	2.42
Learning Resources	2.33
Social and Extra-Curricular	2.02
Physical Environment ...	2.54
Learning and Teaching	2.61
Students	2.84
<b>Over All Response</b>	<b>2.48</b>

Table 2 shows that the students' responses in all sub-divisions of quality indicators about improvement/change seem to fall between fair and good in the scale. The lowest mean (2.02) is social and extra-curricular which involved quality items related with sport and recreational facilities and opportunities for students to organize their own activities. The highest mean (2.84) is students' sub-division which involved quality items related to student information books, rapport between staff and students, follow up of students' progress and attendance and tutorial provision. The other means fall between the two. The overall responses (in all items) mean is 2.48 which imply the opinions of students lay half way between fair and good. The graph below may serve as a quick reference of the student responses on quality improvement in general.

**Figure 1: Students' Opinions on Quality Improvement**





When students' general remarks are considered regarding the three questions listed above the following were obtained.

As to the evaluation of their entire educational experience at their respective institutions the opinions of both male (201) and female (79) respondents seem to be similar as represented by their means which are 2.78 and 2.75 respectively. The means are almost the same which fall between fair and good somewhat inclining to good. In relation to their overall impression of the quality of education at their institutions again the responses of both groups appear to be the same i.e., the means are 2.72 (male) and 2.71 (female). Concerning whether they would like to go to the same institution, if they could start over again, once again the responses of both groups tend to be the same where the means are 2.09 (male) and 2.03 (female). Note, in this particular question students are asked to give their responses in the scale as *definitely yes, probably yes, probably no or definitely no*. The alternatives are weighed 1,2,3,4 going from definitely yes to definitely no. Though, the means lie between probably yes and probably no, the respondents tend, according to the means, to say probably yes. Hence, the following table and graph may serve to have a quick glance on the responses.

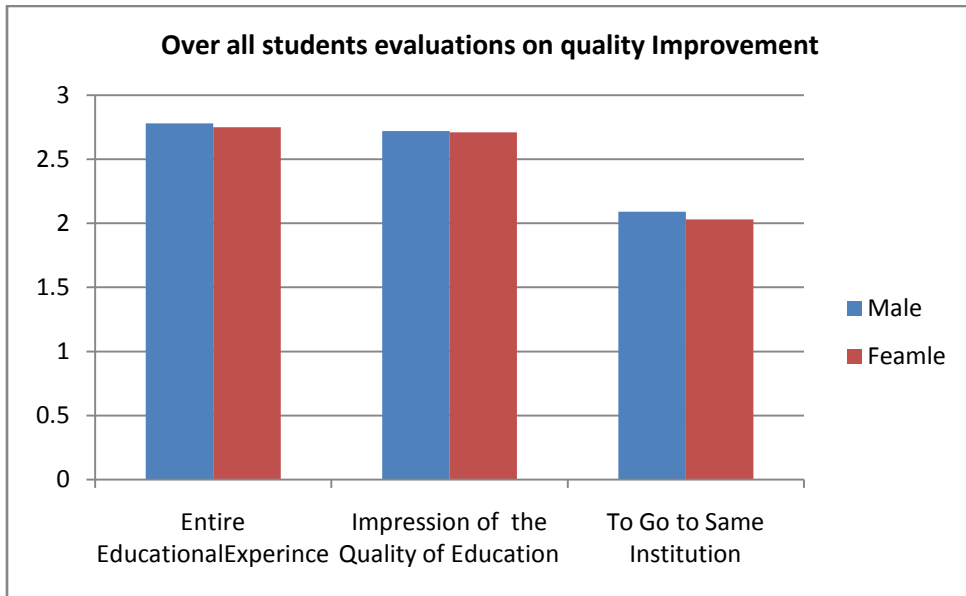
**Table 3: Mean Scores of Students' General Remarks on Quality Improvement**

Sex	Entire Educational Experience	Impression of the Quality of Education	To Go to the Same Institution
Male	2.78	2.72	2.09
Female	2.75	2.71	2.03





**Figure 2: Mean Scores of Students General Remarks on Quality Improvement**



When the issue is examined in each sample institution the following picture was revealed.



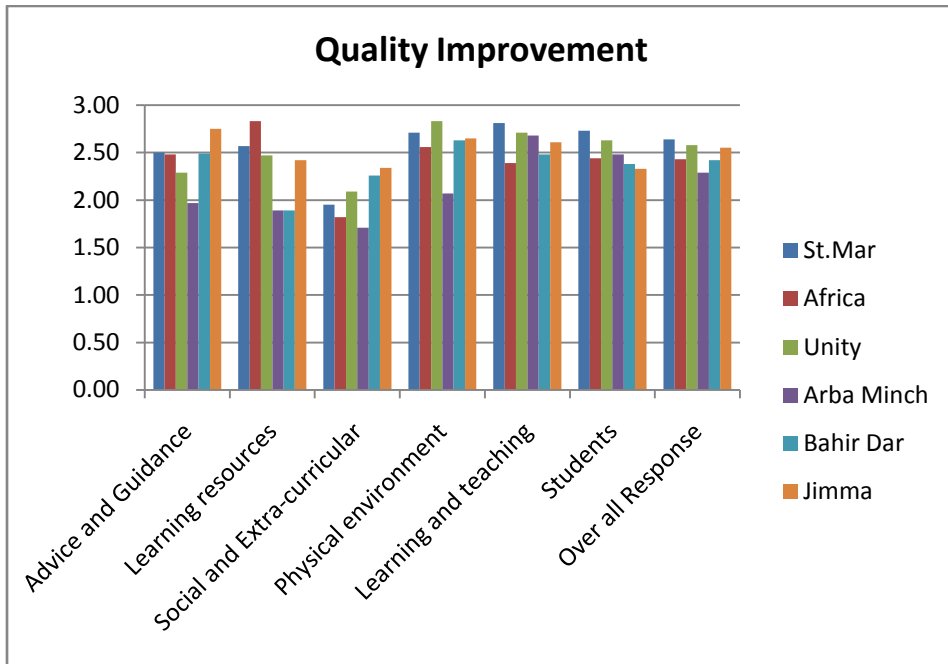
**Table 4: Mean Scores of Students' Responses on Quality Improvements by Institution**

Quality Indicators (Sub-division)	St. Mary's	Africa	Unity	Arba Minch	Bahir Dar	Jimma
Advice and Guidance	2.50	2.48	2.29	1.97	2.49	2.75
Learning resources	2.57	2.83	2.47	1.89	1.89	2.42
Social and Extra-curricular	1.95	1.82	2.09	1.71	2.26	2.34
Physical Environment	2.71	2.56	2.83	2.07	2.63	2.65
Learning and teaching	2.81	2.39	2.71	2.68	2.48	2.61
Students	2.73	2.44	2.63	2.48	2.38	2.33
<b>Over all Response</b>	<b>2.64</b>	<b>2.43</b>	<b>2.58</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>2.42</b>	<b>2.55</b>

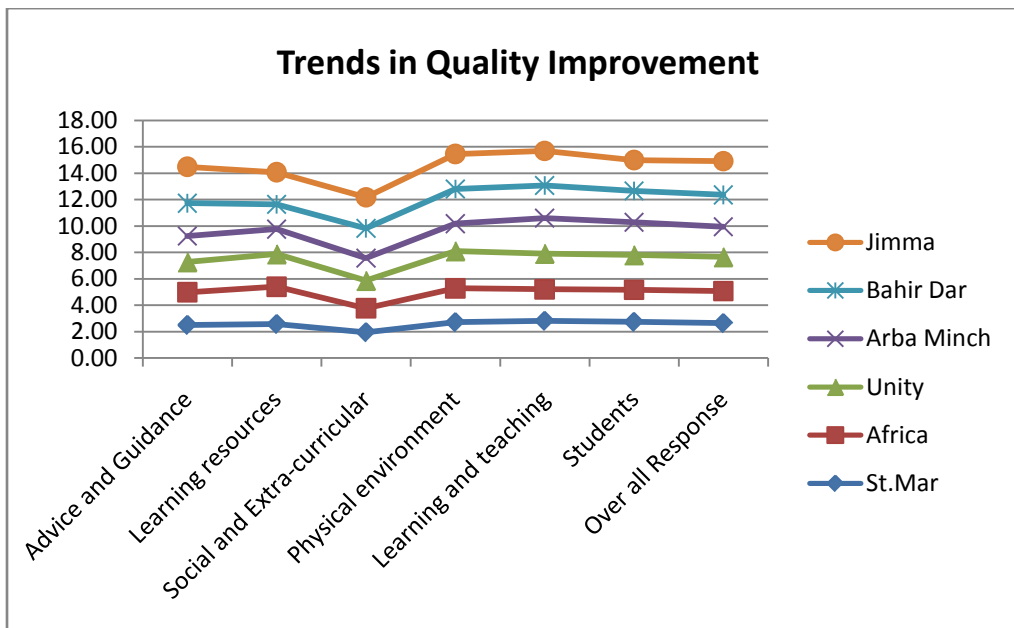
The mean of the overall responses in each institution indicates the general trend of quality improvement as perceived by the students. The highest mean is 2.64 (which is inclined to good in the scale) and the lowest is 2.29 (which inclined to fair in the scale) and the rest remain between the two. Social and extra-curricular quality indicator appears to be the lowest in terms of mean in almost all institutions. The indicator tends to lie below fair which is 2 in the scale. Arba Minch University secured the least means in all quality indicators. St. Mary's from private and Jimma from public tend to have better means. Figures 3 and 4 may seem helpful to visualize the students' opinions on quality improvement regarding each quality indicators vis-à-vis each institution also the general trend within the institutions.



**Figure 3: Mean Scores of Students' Responses on Quality Improvement vis-à-vis Quality Indicators by Institutions**



**Figure 4: Trends in Students' Responses on Quality Improvement vis-à-vis Quality Indicators by Institutions**





Simply to reflect on similarities and differences between the public and private HEIs sectors regarding students' opinions on quality improvement further inquiry was made into the data and the following views were occurred.

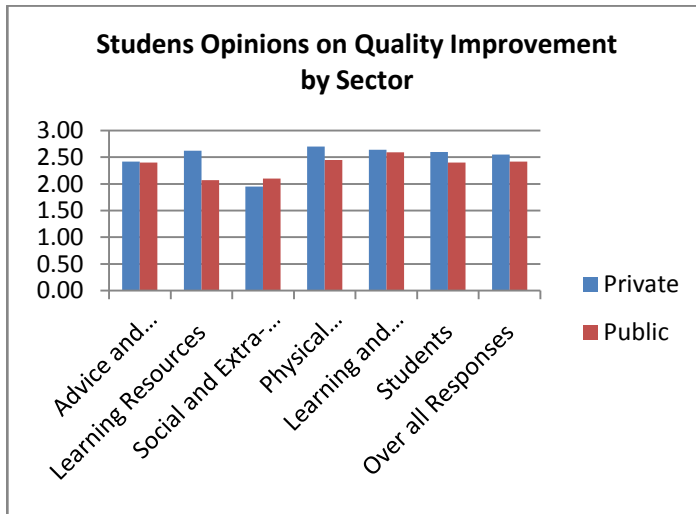
**Table 5: Mean Scores of Students' Responses on Quality Improvements by Sector**

<b>Quality Indicators (Sub-divisions)</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>Public</b>
Advice and Guidance	2.42	2.40
Learning Resources	2.62	2.07
Social and Extra-curricular	1.95	2.10
Physical Environment	2.70	2.45
Learning and Teaching	2.64	2.59
Students	2.60	2.40
<b>Over all Response</b>	<b>2.55</b>	<b>2.42</b>

The means of the overall responses in both sectors appear fairly the same. In private sector the lowest mean (1.95) is for social and extra-curricular sub-division, where as in public sector the lowest mean (2.07) is for learning resources sub-division. The highest mean (2.70) in private sector is for physical environment and in public sector the highest mean (2.59) is for learning and teaching sub-division. The figure below maybe helps to summaries the students' opinions by sector.



**Figure 5: Mean Scores of Students' Responses on Quality Improvements by Sector**



To check whether there is difference between the two groups i.e. private and public sectors the appropriate test of significance was conducted and the result is presented below.

**Table 6: Paired Samples Test on Students' Responses on Quality Improvements Paired Samples Test**

	Paired Differences					t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Private - Public	.15000	.21977	.08307	-.05326	.35326	1.806	6	.121

Table 6 shows that the  $t$  value of 1.806 does not exceeds the  $t$  critical value of 2.447 for a two-tailed test at the .05 level at 6 degrees of freedom, thus, the null hypothesis may be accepted, i.e. there is no difference between the two



groups regarding their responses. In short, SPSS alpha (.121) is greater than .05 alpha, thus the null hypothesis should be accepted.

In conclusion, comparisons were sought among the institutions concerning their reflection on the 3 questions listed beneath to find out their general remarks concerning quality improvement.

1. How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?
2. What is your overall impression of the quality of education at this institution?
3. If you could start over again, would you like to go to the same institution, you are now attending?

**Table 7: Mean Scores of Students Remarks Responses on Quality Improvement by Institutions**

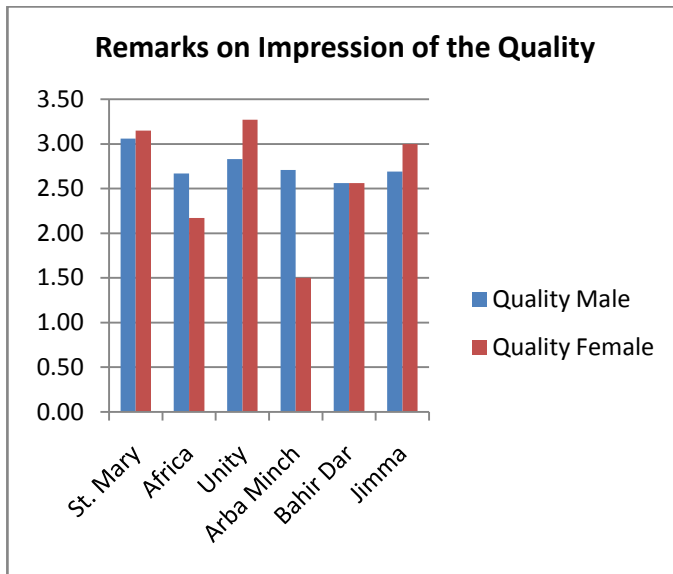
Institutions	Entire Educational Experience		Impression of the Quality of Education		To Go to the Same Institution	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
St. Mary's	2.63	3.04	3.06	3.15	1.94	1.82
Africa	2.81	2.29	2.67	2.17	1.71	2.27
Unity	2.72	3.00	2.83	3.27	2.06	2.27
Arba Minch	2.80	2.50	2.71	1.50	2.45	2.50
Bahir Dar	2.59	2.78	2.56	2.56	2.06	1.78
Jimma	2.92	3.00	2.69	3.00	1.95	1.50

Concerning the entire educational experience at their institutions the responses inclined fairly to good in the scale with exception of female respondents in one private institution which tilted to fair in the scale. About their overall impression of the quality at their institutions again respondents appear to be favorable to some extent where the means in most cases inclined to good in the scale with exception of female respondents from 1 private and 1 public skewed to fair and poor respectively. Regarding whether they would like to go to the same institution, if they could start over again the picture seems satisfactory in almost all cases where the means lie on probably yes in the scale which involved



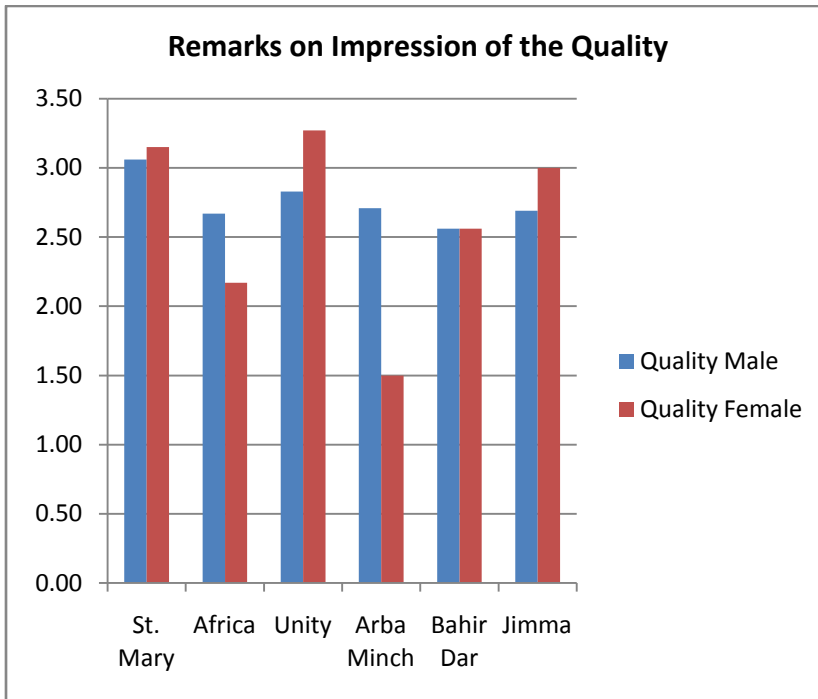
alternatives as definitely yes, probably yes, probably no and definitely no and weighed 1,2,3,4 as it goes from definitely yes to definitely no. The figures below provide a quick summary to the remarks by the students.

**Figure 6: Mean Scores of Students' Remarks on Entire Educational Experience by Institution**

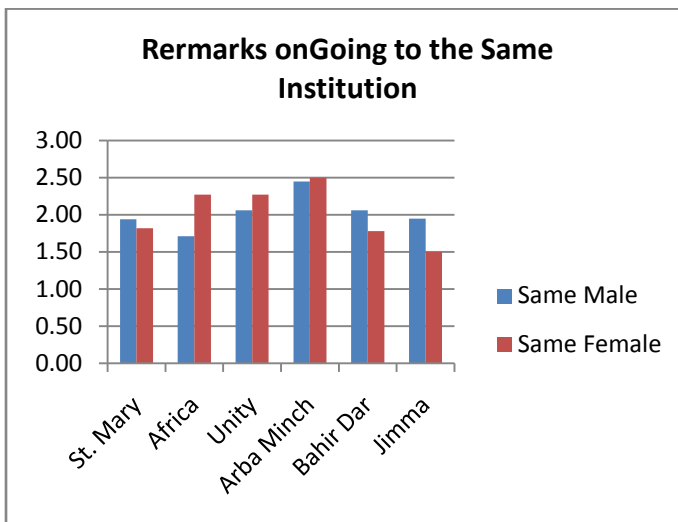




**Figure7: Mean Scores of Students' Remarks on Overall Impression of the Quality by Institution**



**Figure 8: Mean Scores of Students' Remarks on Going to the Same Institution...by Institution**







For Harvey (2003b), the most important use of student feedback (whether published or not) is in providing senior management including quality managers with invaluable information from the student perspective to assist in an institution's continuous quality improvement process. Thus, strengthening the internal quality assurance system will remain at the forefront of the process. The use of such methodologies as the Student Satisfaction Approach has allowed many institutions world-wide to gain an enhanced perception of where improvements need to be made. In light of this, the information gained in this study implies that the prospective graduating students in the sample institutions (both in private and public) seem to be unconvinced in respect of the quality improvement/change in regard to different aspects quality at their institutions. Though it is not the purpose of the study to compare the institutions, no significant difference between the private and public sectors is observed as far as the student opinions are concerned. It is critical for the institutions to strengthen the internal quality assurance system immediately. The tendency for institutions simply to react to external quality monitoring in a top-down fashion rather than in a bottom-up fashion should be stopped.

### **3.3. Prospects and Challenges in the Development of Quality Assurance**

The intensity of the current internal quality assurance activities in Ethiopian HE system, coupled with the perceptions of students of quality and quality assurance, the discussions with quality managers and the effects of external quality assurance (HERQA) as reported in quality audit reports has presented a range of opportunities and challenges to the development of quality assurance and quality culture inter alia the following.

#### **3.3.1 Opportunities**

*Policy Support:* The different government documents including HERQA's argue that, quality as well as assurance of quality is not only an internal institutional matter, but an essential ingredient of an emerging new relationship between the government and the institutions. According to the Higher Education Proclamation No.650/2009, every institution shall have a reliable internal system for quality enhancement that shall be continuously improved. Institutions shall be responsible to give practical effect to appropriate recommendations by the HERQA on quality enhancement



measures that have to be taken. The higher education section of ESDP IV (2010/2011-2014/2015) suggests that one major new emphasis will be the concern with improving the quality and the employability of university graduates. The Growth and Transformation Plan (2010/11-2014/15) clearly specified that the key priority in the higher education system during the five year plan will be to ensure the systems' quality and relevance. To this end, the management and administration of universities will be improved and strengthened. Efforts will be made to ensure the Higher Education Strategic Center and Higher Education Quality Assurance Agency fulfills their missions. Thus, the Ethiopian government has started playing a significant role in encouraging higher education institutions to maintain and improve their academic standards so that they can produce graduates who satisfy the needs of employers and the country.

*HERQA's effects:* The procedure developed by HERQA, requiring institutions to undertake a self-review with HERQA validating the process, have been a major stimulus for the introduction of effective quality assurance systems. A climate of trust and mutual respect is started to evolve between HERQA and HEIs as quality managers hinted and the report (HERQA, 2011b) of the pilot audit of HERQA implied. There are promising signs that HEIs are committed to the audit process, are going beyond symbolic compliance and in some instances are now ready to influence the audit process via identifying own audit themes as part of the next audit cycle. However there is a need to draw attention to two areas of concern. First, the awareness of, and interaction with, the HERQA appears not penetrated deeply to the average academic and administrative staff, students and other internal stakeholders. Second, as the HERQA has no sanctions to enforce its recommendations in the public institutions, the universities themselves will need to accept the primary responsibility for responding to the audit report recommendations.

*Supportive Leadership and Structure:* The commitment of the leadership to quality and quality assurance can have a large influence on the outcomes of the quality assurance activities. The implementation of policy, strategy and core process will be more successful if closely coupled with leadership. Leadership should not be separated from policy, strategy and process ownership. Hence, as the findings suggested the support of the leadership



together with the establishment of a separate body (quality assurance office) to guide the quality assurance effort at the institutions is a point to be reflected positively.

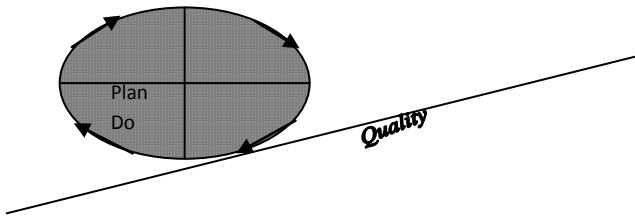
### **3.3.2. Challenges**

*Synergy between internal and external quality assurance:* It is very difficult to deny that external quality assurance by HERQA in the last 12 years has improved quality in HEIs. It could have been much more if external and internal quality assurance and quality enhancement had been better balanced to create the quality assurance movement. Therefore, there is a challenge in front of the HEIs. Of course, the synergy between internal and external quality assurance will only be effective if the two parties, the HEIs and the Agency, meet on equal terms, which means the HEIs must be prepared to meet the obligations set by the government about internal quality assurance. That is, HEIs should have a well-established policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and relevance of their programs. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognizes the importance of relevance, quality and quality assurance in all their work. In order to gain legitimacy, internal and external parties must show confidence and good faith (Meyer and Rowan, 1991).

*Creating a practical internal quality assurance system:* The findings indicated that the present system at the institutions seems to be not well-established. The system appears to be at infancy stage. Concerning the system, there is no one universal model for all institutions throughout the world. Each university needs to decide how the model should fit their organizational culture and function for the purposes intended. Regardless of the model differences the Deming Cycle---Plan-Do-Check-Act (Deming, 1988)---can serve as the basic elements in designing an internal quality assurance system. Each university can decide which potential activities and actions each stage would need.



**Figure 9: Deming's PDCA Cycle**



*Advancing stakeholders' involvements in quality assurance and quality enhancement process:* Any measurement of quality and quality improvement in higher education that falls short of the centrality of students' experience is bound to be peripheral and fail to provide information about how students find the experience and how much they are learning and progressing throughout their years in university. There are contested views over quality and its measurement which inform the preferences of different stakeholders in higher education. To understand quality it is necessary to recognize that it has contradictory meanings that can lead to different assessment methods, and thus different practical outcomes. In general the different perspectives of the stakeholders of higher education must be considered when addressing the issue of quality. There are many internal and external stakeholders for whom quality of higher education is vital. Collaboration with other agencies is one area where HERQA does not at all adhere to the standards of the Code of Good Practice of INQAAHE as stipulated in the trial audit (HERQA, 2011b). This also applies to individual HEIs.

*HERQA's fitness for the purpose:* Evaluators of higher education pass judgments on the institutions they visit. Thus, it is important to know more about the evaluators and the extent to which they are fit for purpose. As far as the degree of expectations in HERQA's are concerned there seem to be contrasting views. Thus implies the need, that experts should have an in-depth knowledge of the field and experience of higher education. HERQA acting as a national watchdog of quality in the higher education should be accountable to the stakeholders for the quality of its work and should demonstrate publicly that the quality assurance process implemented achieved the desired objectives. Thus, HERQA needs to build a robust and transparent quality assurance system to convey confidence to its



stakeholders and this has been clearly stated in the pilot audit of HERQA (HERQA, 2011b). Key stakeholders and key actors, like professional associations, have to be brought together in coordinating the quality enhancement process. A successful quality enhancement is to be made from an organic, bottom up approach where focus is on key stake holders to get the bigger picture of quality. The next chapter deals with the summary, conclusion and recommendations.

#### **4. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations**

This chapter wraps up the study with summary of the procedure of the study, conclusions of the findings and the implications of the study as well as recommendations for the future inquiry, and concludes the study.

##### **4.1. Summary and Conclusions**

This study was planned to investigate the status of quality and quality assurance regime at some selected public and private HEIs. Hence, appraising the perceived status of quality and quality assurance developments from students' point of view and mapping out some major opportunities and challenges were the focuses of the investigation.

To meet the objectives of the study, the major sources of data were the 6 HEIs sample (3 public and 3 private) which runs degree programs. Thus, graduating students, quality managers and quality audit reports by HERQA were considered as primary and secondary sources. Questionnaires, Discussions, and Document Surveys were primarily employed to collect data from the different the groups.

The study integrated both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods. The data obtained via closed form questionnaires were organized and analyzed using the SPSS to know the students responses in regard to each basic questions concerning quality assurance and quality enhancement practices in the HEIs. The differences among the institutions were also examined. In the mean time those data obtained by discussions and examination of documentary materials were analyzed using the qualitative methods.



Results were discussed to show the reality in the HEIs how well or not so well they are in terms of quality in their provisions. The discussion was primarily focused on perceived current practices of the graduating students in the institutions and made some comparison among them to see whether there are differences positively or negatively. Thus, the discussion on the findings may provide a useful piece of information for the concerned stakeholders on the HEIs with regard to building a path towards quality assurance system which they are frequently questioned for and become the cause for the formation of negative perception towards the sector. Moreover, the discussion attempted to shade light on the areas that HEIs need to act towards improving their quality and thereby removing suspicion towards the sector

The study implied that the prospective graduating students in the sample institutions (both in private and public) seemed to be unconvinced with respect to the quality improvement/change in regard to the different aspects of quality at their institutions. Although, it was not the prime purpose of the study to compare the institutions, as indicated by the *t test*, *no significant difference* between the private and public sectors was observed as far as the student opinions are concerned. It is critical for the institutions to strengthen the internal quality assurance system immediately. The tendency for institutions simply to react to external quality monitoring in a top-down fashion rather than in a bottom-up fashion should be stopped.

The intensity of the current internal quality assurance activities in Ethiopian HE system, coupled with the perceptions of students of quality and quality assurance, the discussions with quality managers and the effects of external quality assurance (HERQA) as reported in quality audit reports has presented a range of opportunities and challenges to the development of quality assurance and quality culture inter alia the following.

#### Opportunities:

- policy Support;
- institutional capacity building (for public ones);
- HERQA's effects; and
- supportive leadership and structure.



Challenges:

- synergy between internal and external quality assurance;
- creating a practical internal quality assurance system;
- advancing stakeholders' involvements in quality assurance and quality enhancement process; and
- HERQA's fitness for the purpose.

#### **4.2. Recommendations**

On the basis of the findings the following recommendations are made:-

1. *Maximizing stakeholders' involvement* seems to be the first thing in quality and quality assurance process. In addition to students, senior managers should bring academic staff and administrative staff and other internal stakeholders on board to build ownership among the different university community. The institutions need to appoint a quality assurance representative in each department to run departmental quality assurance initiatives and represent the departmental voices at university /university college quality assurance and strategic planning meetings. Staff of an institution and the quality of that staff plays a very large role in assuring institutional quality (Brooks, 2009; McIlroy, 1997; Taylor, 1997).
2. *More self-assessment and monitoring* with peer evaluation and professional evaluation should take place regularly. There is a tendency for institutions to react to external quality monitoring in a top-down fashion rather than in a bottom-up fashion. For institutional reputations are continually being assessed and so threatened. Individual institutions encounter the exercise only once every five years; there remains a danger that quality assessment is seen as a process of 'jumping through hoops' and not providing encouragement to an ongoing commitment to quality. The ultimate aim in quality assurance in the institutions should be continuous quality improvement. Quality assurance should be a cyclical process gaining effectiveness over time. It can be argued that the ideal quality assurance system is one that acts on a formative basis. It acts continuously and internally over time to regulate or cause improvements and assure the stakeholders. Providing of





information (both qualitative and quantitative) which is timely and consistent to inform planning and enhancement in all faculties and departments; documented procedures and processes to assure standard and ensure consistency across the institution; appropriately resourced policies and strategies which provide the necessary underpinning to enhance functions; and extensive use of reviews/reports on progress of operational plans for information for internal and external stakeholders, comparison between observed and intended standards and for further action plans seem to be the full quality cycle and provide a basis for quality enhancement at different levels.

3. *Additional quality strategies, principles and practices* will be helpful in further building up an internal quality system and in developing a quality culture in the institutions, among other things,
  - care for quality at basic units in the institution;
  - the international orientation;
  - an operational quality concept and quality system embedded in the institutional overall strategy;
  - closing the feedback loops;
  - distributed leadership at all levels in the organization;
  - a quality culture based on a top-down and bottom-up approach;
  - involvement of students and key actors;
  - using a quality award for self-assessments; and
  - use of external expertise especially professional associations.
  
4. This study proposes a *pragmatic approach* to addressing quality: an approach that determines a set of criteria that are considered to be the determinants of quality, which are stakeholder-determined and are then used for measuring quality. Hence, each higher education institution needs to create a practical internal quality assurance system. Concerning this system, there is no one best replica for all institutions. Each institution needs to decide how a given model fits the organizational culture and function for the purposes intended. As Deming (1988) suggested institutions should Plan-Do-Check-Act as the basic elements in designing an internal quality assurance system. This simple cycle refers to the infinite rotation of





experimentation that constitutes quality enhancement efforts and offers focus on correcting as well as preventing deficiencies. Thus, problems related with lack of quality innovations, employee resistance to change, lack of professional development for staff, time and financial constraints, issue of defining quality, lack of communication, etc. can be resolved through time and concerted efforts.

5. There should be a *big leadership commitment* within the universities themselves determined to embrace the quality improvement philosophy. Without top management taking up ownership of quality management it will be impossible to set up any quality assurance mechanism effectively. Since higher education institutions need resources to establish and operate internal quality assurance systems the leadership role is pivotal. The leaders at the university should regularly communicate to faculty and staff about the importance of quality. The top management should do more than just talk about quality; they must very much involve in action.
6. *Raising awareness activities and providing trainings* to different internal and external stakeholders on quality and quality assurance practices may help to cascade and promote quality and quality assurance matters comprehensively. It may help to bolster development of quality assurance systems at the individual, academic unit, faculty, and institutional level. The present state of the quality assurance system development at department and university levels seem to be nascent in most institutions. Undoubtedly, understanding quality assurance concepts is the key to success in quality assurance practices (Johnson, 1993; Engelkemeyer, 1998).
7. Ethiopia's *need for an external quality system* is clear. The Ethiopian higher education is currently expanding, enrollment continues to grow, new providers are entering the higher education market, and global economic forces necessitate a quality higher education sector. The need for an external quality assurance system does not mean that a system should be implemented without careful consideration given to the context in which that system is expected to operate.



First and foremost, whatever external quality assurance system develops has to be able to accommodate various concepts and measures of quality for it to earn the support of the majority of academic community.

8. *A climate of trust and mutual respect* should be further developed between HERQA and the HEIs. Creating a basis for mutual recognition between external and internal quality assurance systems can be a major stimulus for introduction of effective quality systems. Institution-wide surveys should provide both data for internal improvement and information for external stakeholders.
9. Finally, the researcher believes that the issue of quality and quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education context has not been researched at all adequately. Basically, the evidence seems to be that there is little data on policy and strategic matters, the organization of higher education, teaching and learning process, research and consultancy, and community engagement which all need to address quality issues. Therefore *more research*, with larger sample, adequate instruments, appropriate and rigorous procedures seem to be necessary. .

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