

**External Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education:
Comparing Practices in Public and Private Universities**

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Comparing Practices in Public and Private Universities**

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Addis Ababa University

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation, entitled “External Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Comparing Practices in Public and Private Universities” is my original work, and has not been presented for a degree in any other university, and that all sources of materials used in the dissertation have been duly acknowledged.

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This Dissertation has been submitted for examination with my approval as a principal/co-supervisor.

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Abstract

This research has aimed to investigate the actual practices (i.e., the essence, implementation practices, and perceived outcomes) of the Ethiopian higher education EQA, particularly in the contexts of selected public and private universities in a comparative fashion. Theoretically, the study subsumes some of the underlying assumptions or convictions in the contingency and the neo-institutional theories to look deeply into the technical and the institutional environments, respectively, in understanding the EQA practices at each case study institution. Methodologically, the study has relied on the qualitative research method and the comparative case study research design. Accordingly, the data have been collected through the use of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document reviews. In the analysis, the data that are generated from diverse sources of evidence are systematically transcribed, coded, and ultimately interpreted adequately. In this way, the analysis has been taken place in two stages: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. As a principal finding, the study has got a lot of convergences and divergences in conceptions, views, and positions upon the essence, implementation practices, and outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system in the ambits of case study public and private universities. More specifically, the study has found out that there is a similar inclination to conceptualize the EQA system purely as an external deed that has been decoupled from/loosely coupled with the core activities in case institutions. In this research, the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation are found to be the most commonly used EQA approaches. Following the implementation patterns of these quality-assuring mechanisms, currently, the quality improvement intention has been materialized in both case universities, whereas the quality control is only meant for the private institution. Concerning the challenges, the study has pinpointed that a lot of prominent non-university-specific and university-specific setbacks such as the contentious and ambiguous legal framework (provisions); the HERQA's serious limitations in autonomy, credibility, and capacity/capability; the inadequate involvement (ownership and commitment) of multiple external stakeholders and internal actors in the course of the EQA system implementation; and the shortage of human, financial, and material resources in case study institutions are constraining the effective implementation of the EQA system (mechanisms) in case universities (though the degree varies from one institution to the other). With regard to the outcomes, the study has shown that the EQA system is believed to be brought the agenda of quality to the forefront and somewhat served as a catalyst for the indoor quality assurance endeavors in case universities. In contrast, it has also brought about temporary adjustments (symbolic compliance) in these institutions. Nevertheless, since both the quality audit and the accreditations approaches are being implemented in private case university, the institution is burdened by excessive control and regulation and, at the same time, gains positive outcomes more than the public counterpart. In the end, based on the major findings (and conclusions) in this research, useful suggestions (about possible developments and qualitative improvements of the current EQA practices) are offered to the Ethiopian government/the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE), the HERQA, and also to the individual case study universities. These include: initiating an all-inclusive and equitable policy framework that treats public and private HEIs fairly; helping the HERQA to be fully independent/autonomous, credible, capable, and a truly professional agency as a whole; capacitating HEIs with the necessary support and assistance, and empowering them in the EQA processes and activities; and ensuring the integration of the EQA system into the core philosophies, structures, and norms and cultures of the universities. In all, this research call for

an eclectic approach (system) by all concerned parties, actors, and stakeholders if the EQA has to best achieve its goals in public and private HEIs in the country.

Keywords: *essence, implementation practices, and (perceived) outcomes; EQA; neo-institutional theory; contingency theory; qualitative research method; comparative case study design; HERQA; public and private universities/HEIs*

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAU	Addis Ababa University
CCEPS	Center for Comparative Education and Policy Studies
DU	Dilla University
EETP	Ethiopian Education and Training Policy
EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
EQA	External Quality Assurance
ESC	Education Strategic Centre
ESDP	Education Sector Development Program
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HERQA	Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency
HESC	Higher Education Strategic Centre
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoSHE	Ministry of Science and Higher Education
SED	Self-Evaluation Document
SMU	Saint Mary’s University
SNNPRS	Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State
TQM	Total Quality Management
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UCoAA	University College of Addis Ababa
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This chapter is organized into six parts. The first part sets the background for this research. The second part deals with the problem statement and the key research questions in the study. This is followed by the presentation of the rationale and significance of the study in part three. The scope and limitations of the study are explained in the fourth part of this chapter. Finally, the fifth and sixth parts cover the definition of key terms and the organization of the study, respectively.

1.1 Background of the Study

Higher education is considered as one of the main tools for the development and prosperity of any nation, as it provides the human resource and intellectual capital, which satisfies basic social, psychological, and other multifaceted needs (Nielsen & Birch, 2015). However, in recent years, policies and practices in higher education throughout the world have been impacted by the neoliberal ideology or thought (Adamson et al. as cited in Huang, 2014; Besley, 2009; Olssen, 2016). Neoliberalism envisages the importance of opening up world markets and developing the role of the private sector mainly in political, economic, and social affairs/arenas, including sectors such as education (Adamson et al. as cited in Huang, 2014; Badat, 2009; Ball, 2012; Besley, 2009; Goswami, 2013).

This contemporary development has resulted in the education sector being considered as one of the business activities like other non-educative areas and led the universities or HEIs to make transitions from more narrow self-sustaining universities that are largely for the elites and the wealthiest and privileged groups to mass or more inclusive universities, where new groups of students have been recruited and the number of students enrolled has increased dramatically (Goswami, 2013; Huang, 2014; Masehela, 2015; Nielsen & Birch, 2015). This emerging scenario in the higher education sector has also brought a call for more formal (explicit and systematized) quality assurance schemes than it was needed in the traditional elite universities (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Kandiko, 2010; Martin & Stella, 2007; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2006, 2011).

For Mensah (2016), designing and implementing quality assurance schemes in HEIs is used to ensure that students receive high quality and relevant education and those degrees and diplomas are widely recognized. Such recognition is seen to be essential by domestic and international employers and other presser groups. On top of that, quality assurance is taken as an important element for public accountability purposes, notably to satisfy taxpayers about value for money and that government subsidies are supporting educational activities of an appropriate standard or level (Harman, 2000; Masehela, 2015). Harman and Masehela further remark that quality assurance helps to move forward students' choices amid a growing diversity of course offerings, and it also improves teaching and administrative processes (ensures overall system improvement) in HEIs. Therefore, to reap all the better fruits of quality assurance, now worldwide, many countries have been paying greater attention to the regulation and promotion of quality within their higher education sectors (Hina & Ajmal, 2016).

In actual fact, quality assurance as 'a management tool', to preclude quality problems and maintain the provision of quality education in higher education was first, formally started in 1985 by two colleges in the USA, and in the late 1980s to the early 1990s in the UK (Hsu, 2017; Owilia & Aspinwall, 1997). These developments continued in the 1990s in a range of Western countries and outspreading beyond Europe to countries such as New Zealand and Australia. Then quality assurance had promptly been radiated to the rest of the world over the past few decades (Dill, 2010; El-Khawas, 2007; Hussain, 2011; Wondwosen, 2018a).

As has been alluded to above, at present, quality assurance has become a global issue. Particularly because of the booming of internationalization of higher education, globalization, and growing demand for ensuring accountability, there has also been a considerable rise in the practices of EQA systems in HEIs throughout the world (Harvey, 2002b; Kristensen, 2010; Tefera, 2015; Wondwosen, 2018a). In this regard, in one way or another, the renowned international institutions and groups, notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and other transboundary networks, regional organizations, as well as professional associations have played a significant role (Harvey, 2005; Singh as cited in Mulu, 2012; Vaira, 2004).

As Vann (2012) enunciates, in many developed countries, the administrative responsibility for the management of external/quality assurance in HEIs falls in the hands of agencies or special units who specialize in academic work and function independently from the interferences of the governments and other influential groups. Nevertheless, compared to the developed nations where the conditions that make quality possible are already in effect (e.g., the needed policies, procedures, and infrastructures), developing countries face far more arduous situations (Nguyen, 2016). For instance, as Goswami (2013) and Vann (2012) contend, worldwide, quality assurance mechanisms in developing nations are launched with the help of economically advanced nations as they seriously lack qualified people that can set in place vibrant quality assurance schemes in their higher education sectors. As a result, in most developing countries, quality assurance systems and practices lack relevance, and they have not yet been served as curative means to overcome the inherent quality bottlenecks in their HEIs (Materu, 2007; Vann, 2012).

In Africa, particularly in the recent few decades, one major characteristic of its higher education is its tremendous and rapid expansion (Yohannes, 2007). But a quickening pace of enrolment and fast institutional expansion rates virtually in all countries of the continent have escalated without commensurate skilled human, financial, material, and other resources available. Therefore, the combination of these factors has significantly challenged the provision of quality higher education in Africa, and following this circumstance, a need to strictly monitor quality is becoming an obvious task in HEIs (Damtew, 2007; Yohannes, 2007). Furthermore, as private higher education becomes an increasingly essential feature of Africa's higher education landscape, it has more triggered a need to police private HEIs by establishing EQA or accreditation bodies and developing the necessary operational quality guidelines or criteria (Damtew, 2007). In general, in Africa where there is a rapidly growing and diverse higher education system, the need to assure quality through external and internal scrutinies, audits, subject reviews, or benchmarking is evident, but it has not yet been made clear if quality and standards of education are augmented as a consequence (Hina & Ajmal, 2016).

Materu (2007) finds that even though formal quality assurance in Africa is a recent phenomenon, currently, it is becoming an integral part of its higher education systems as governments in many parts of the continent have shown their concerns and commitments to its establishment and operation. Nonetheless, as Yohannes (2007) asserts, the higher education quality and the quality assurance systems, particularly in East Africa are still at the infant stage and confronted with in

face of a multitude of setbacks (e.g., the limited administrative capacity to run effectively the accreditation and the quality audit processes; shortage of qualified staff members, financial budgets, and instructional aids to convey quality education; etc.).

In the case of Ethiopia, at present, there is fast institutional and enrolment expansion witnessed in the country. The number of public and private universities/HEIs has speedily risen. Their total enrolment capacity in the undergraduate and post-graduate programs has also grown tremendously from time to time (Federal Ministry of Education [FMoE], 2015). Following this rapid (partly unbridled and unplanned) expansion rate, the issue of quality has become a point of discussion both in private and public universities/HEIs and a major concern for all stakeholders, including the government (Kebede, 2014; Mulu, 2012). So, the Ethiopian government has authorized the higher education proclamations and established the national quality assurance agency (i.e., the HERQA) to keep watch over the quality of the education being offered in public and private HEIs, as of its inception in 2003 (Tesfaye, 2015).

Empirically, however, much has not yet been investigated about the actual practices of Ethiopian higher education EQA in the milieus of public and private degree-granting HEIs via the interpretivist/constructivist perspectives¹. To fill in this gap, this study is conducted by taking the private and public universities in Ethiopia as comparable units of analysis.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Even if Ethiopia has possessed an age-old elite education that was linked to the major religious domains in the country, the secular higher education was initiated in 1950 with the founding of the UCoAA and then stayed long without adequate expansion (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2013; Saint, 2004; World Bank [WB], 2003). Since the end of the 1990s, however, Ethiopia has aggressively expanded its higher education, as it was triggered by an educational system reform in the mid-1990s with a stated goal of massification as a way to mitigate poverty and transform a country into a better position (MoE, 2013).

¹ See also Chapter Four.

As Kedir (2009) remarks, despite the fact that the massive proliferation of private and public HEIs in the country has brought about improved access to higher education for students, meanwhile, it also creates a serious and clear danger for the provision of quality education in those institutions. Therefore, by recognizing the importance of ensuring and maintaining quality in this new context, the HERQA has started a wide range of activities, including accreditations, quality audits, consultative and training workshops with various stakeholders such as public and private HEIs' leaders/managers and academic staff members and representatives of different government and professional organizations, and draft benchmark development for selected subjects/disciplines since 2003 (Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA], 2011a, 2014; Tesfaye, 2015). At the same time, the HERQA expects public and private HEIs in Ethiopia to be quite responsive to take an active part in the course of the EQA system implementation in their respective institutions (Tesfaye & Kassahun, 2009).

Nevertheless, concerning the current Ethiopian higher education EQA practices, many research works (e.g., Abeya, 2014; Kebede, 2014; Misgana, 2013; Mulu, 2012; Rediet, 2015; Tefera, 2015; etc.) have found that though it is still blurred to understand; there seems to exist discrepancy or mismatch between what is intended (in the EQA system) and what actually takes place (in public and private HEIs). In line with this fact, for instance, Newton (2000) posits that the success of a quality assurance system is dependent less on the neatness of the dry documented quality assurance policy or guidelines, but more on its contingent use by actors and how they view, understand, and implement the quality assurance system itself. Likewise, for Giertz (2000) and Harvey and Williams (2010), exploring conceptions, views, positions, or experiences that relevant actors and stakeholders have towards the essence (essential features), implementation practices, and outcomes of a quality assurance system, cumulatively, will help to understand the whole quality assurance scenario in a certain context, and this in turn helps to device possible mechanisms to minimize its potential and practical implementation challenges.

By the same token, in order to have a better understanding of the Ethiopian higher education EQA practices, the conceptions, views, and positions of the major internal actors and external stakeholders, in this light need to be well-studied. But in fact, these issues have not so far been well-considered in the previous studies. The gap has therefore inspired me to explore the actual

practices of EQA in the contexts of selected public and private universities in Ethiopia mainly with the help of the qualitative method and the comparative case study design². Furthermore, as a theoretical backdrop, the study utilizes the underlying assumptions that reside in the neo-institutional and the contingency organizational theories³ (i.e., for the sake of tackling some prominent external and internal environmental constructs, which have their own repercussions on the EQA practices in those of selected institutions, respectively).

Based on the underlined problem and the aforementioned theoretical convictions, the central research questions that guide this comparative case study are framed into four (A-D) main themes:

- A. How is the essence (or essential features) of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system viewed/labeled in the public and private universities?
 - How do the academic staff, leaders, and external stakeholders conceive/portray the EQA system?
 - How are the purposes of the EQA system outlined/analyzed?
- B. How are the implementation practices of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system perceived/described in the public and private universities?
 - What are the major EQA approaches that are in place and how are they implemented in the institutions?
 - How do the external and internal environmental constructs affect the implementation of the EQA system in the institutions?
- C. How are the overall outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system observed/expounded in the public and private universities? and at last,
- D. What are the key similarities and differences between the public and private universities in respect of the essence, implementation practices, and perceived outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system?

² See Chapter Four.

³ See Chapter Three.

1.3 Rationale and Significance of the Study

Nowadays, higher education quality assurance is ubiquitous or increasingly becoming of paramount importance, and one of the areas of hot contentions and ongoing debates throughout the world (Hina & Ajmal, 2016; Ibrahim, 2014). Hence, in the first place, this objective reality catches my attention and initiates me to undertake this study on such a topical issue. Next to this, as FMOE (2015) attests, following the holistic change that has been occurred in the Ethiopian higher education landscape, both public and private HEIs are becoming complex in terms of expanding access and study programs (see also Mulu, 2012). At this juncture, I therefore strongly believe that the actual practices of Ethiopian higher education EQA deserve to be well-studied.

Lastly, as far as my knowledge goes, there is a scarcity of comparative research that is purely conducted on the area of EQA practices by considering the experiences of diverse HEIs (i.e., public, private, etc.) in Ethiopia. Instead, the existing studies have been emphasized on addressing the quality assurance methods, procedures, and practices (e.g., Abebaw & Aster, 2012; Essete, 2009; Melaku, 2008); the policy, purposes, and practices of quality assurance (e.g., Abeya, 2014; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Kebede, 2014; Misgana, 2013; Mulu, 2012; Rediet, 2015; Tefera, 2015; Tesfaye, 2013); and the institutionalization of quality assurance (e.g., Rediet, 2014). So, this comparative case study is conducted to fill this research gap.

On top of that, the study is significant in various ways. Firstly, it adds theoretical and empirical knowledge to the body of the existing literature on the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, and current roles and functions thereof to promote the education quality in public and private universities by taking the institutional and technical influencing factors into account. Secondly, as the study uncovers multidimensional views in regard to the actual practices of Ethiopian higher education EQA, it will provide valuable information to the policy-makers and other actors and stakeholders in the area. Thirdly, through a critical consideration of the global external/quality assurance practices, the study brings about valid lessons that could be useful for the Ethiopian higher education context. Finally, this research study will also serve as a springboard for further research in the area of higher education external/quality assurance in Ethiopia.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope indicates the boundaries of a given research undertaking in terms of content, target

group/population, and geographical spread (Ogula, 2005). Accordingly, this study pertains to the actual practices of Ethiopian higher education EQA in the contexts of selected public and private universities. Under this overriding theme, the study deals with the following seminal topics: the essence, implementation practices, and perceived outcomes of the EQA system. Regarding the research cases, one public university (i.e., Dilla University), and another private university (i.e., Saint Mary's University) are purposely chosen to be studied in a comparative manner. Also, a limited number of informants are deliberately selected in the study from the MoSHE, the HERQA, and the two case study institutions (see Table 4.1)⁴.

Nevertheless, some limitations have impacted this research study. Firstly, as the study has taken a few cases and used a small sample size, it is limited to make too general principles and conclusions (beyond the samples or selected universities). Notwithstanding the limitation in generalizability, the study may, however, convey important insights on the actual EQA practices in the ambit of Ethiopian higher education. Secondly, the lack of willingness of some of the informants to be tape-recorded during the interview and the FGD sessions has compelled me only to make use of notes and short memos to capture their responses. In this way, there might be a loss of some useful information, and this possibly affects the quality of the study to a certain extent. Therefore, in general, being cognizant of these and other limitations, I have been committed to the utmost level of veracity in undertaking this research study.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Quality assurance terms or concepts can be employed in a variety of ways and may therefore have diverse meanings in different countries, institutions, and contexts (Materu, 2007). In this sense, this part presents the precise contextual meanings of some of the key terms that are used in the study.

Accreditation: Refers to the permission that is granted to a private HEI (based upon the evaluation of the human, material, and financial input and the curriculum/curricula the institution has put in place) to operate an educational program for three consecutive years (HERQA, 2011b, 2019; Tesfaye, 2015).

⁴ See also Chapter Four.

EQA System: Refers to the policies, directives, approaches, or procedures, which are mostly devised by an EQA body (that perhaps be a quality assurance agency or any other recognized organization or group) to ensure the provision of quality education in HEIs (Liu, 2016; UNESCO, 2006). Also, ‘EQA (Practice)’ is mainly the action of an EQA body, which assesses and evaluates the operations and the performances of a HEI or its academic programs to determine whether meeting the standards that have been agreed on (UNESCO, 2006, 2010). In this sense, in this research study, the essence, implementation practices, and perceived outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, used for a critical manifestation of the ‘actual EQA practices’ in the two case institutions.

External Institutional Quality Audit: “Is an in-depth assessment of –the quality and relevance of programs and the teaching and learning environment and –the appropriateness/effectiveness of a HEI’s approach to quality care, its systems of accountability, and its internal review mechanisms” (HERQA, 2006c, p. 5).

External Stakeholders: They reside outside of case study universities (see Bjørkquist, 2009; Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Mulu, 2012; Sencila, 2013). But they have their own stake (interest, concern, or involvement) in one way or another in the (process of implementation of the) Ethiopian higher education EQA system. As a result, in this study, the MoSHE and the HERQA are duly considered as sources of data. In some cases, they may also refer to some other external bodies such as professional expert groups, subject specialists, employers, and others (Matei & Iwinska, 2016).

Higher Education: “...education in the arts and sciences offered to undergraduate and graduate students who attend degree programs” (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 2009, p. 4977). Also, ‘University’ is an institution that has got the status (of a university) by the MoE (now MoSHE), and engages in the teaching-learning, research, and community service activities (FDRE, 2009; MoE, 2003, 2012).

Internal Actors/Stakeholders: They are part and parcel of the community in each of the case study universities and mainly concerned with the putting in place of the EQA system in their respective institutions (see Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Mulu, 2012; Sencila, 2013). In this study, therefore, they (e.g., the leaders and the academic staff) are considered as sources of data.

Private University: A non-public university that is established or owned by individuals, families, and shareholder companies or non-profit-making associations, but has been approved by the HERQA/MoSHE for the provision of standardized university education in the country (FDRE, 2009; MoE, 2003; Wondwosen & Damtew, 2018).

Public University: A university that has been established under the jurisdiction of the MoE (now MoSHE) by the regulation of the council of ministers, and is largely financed by the government of the FDRE (FDRE, 2009; MoE, 2003).

Quality: Refers to ‘fitness for purpose’ (HERQA, 2011b). Meaning that, meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards as prescribed by an accrediting or a quality assurance agency or body (Hayward, 2006).

Quality Assurance: An all-embracing term that covers policies, processes, and actions through which the quality of higher education is upheld and advanced (Harvey & Green, 1993; Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2007). Moreover, “...as a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgments (not ranking) through an agreed-upon and consistent process and well-established criteria” (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007, p. 74).

Re-accreditation: Refers to the permission that is granted to a private HEI (based upon the assessment of the status of the human, material, and financial input the institution has put in place) to run an academic program for five consecutive years beginning from the end of the accreditation period (HERQA, 2011b, 2019; Tesfaye, 2015).

1.6 Organization of the Study

This study comprises of eight chapters. The first chapter is an introductory part, consisting of the background of the study, statement of the problem, rationale and significance of the study, scope and limitations of the study, and definition of key terms. The second chapter reviews the related literature in connection with the subject of this research study. This is followed by in-depth descriptions and discussions of the theoretical framework of the study in chapter three. The fourth chapter is devoted to the presentation of the detailed accounts of the research methodology. The fifth chapter sets out the context of this research study. In this regard, it describes the history of

and the quality assurance systems in Ethiopian higher education. After that, the single-case and the cross-case analyses are undertaken in regard to the essence, implementation practices, and (perceived) outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, in the sixth and seventh chapters, respectively. Finally, the eighth chapter provides the final discussion (reflection), conclusions, and implications.

CHAPTER TWO

Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Reviewing the literature on the subject under study is referring to investigators' meticulously review of pertinent literature to get more theoretical understanding and insight into the issues, and to determine what they may already have been carried out (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Razavieh, 2010). In accordance with this, under this chapter, an endeavor has been made to review important research work or literature in relation to the following principal topics: concept of quality and quality assurance in higher education, purposes/functions of quality assurance, quality assurance systems in higher education, general approaches to external/quality assurance in higher education, specific strategies/methods to higher education quality assurance, the rise/growth of quality assurance, and at last, major quality assurance models in higher education.

2.1. The Conceptualization of Quality and Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The concept of quality is not a newly emerged one; but rather it has always been part and parcel of academic tradition or convention (Newton, 2006). According to Bernhard (2012), the term quality was started to be used in ancient philosophy. For example, in Aristotle's ontology, quality is delineated as the essential features of a matter that makes it what it is and differentiates it from others. Likewise, etymologically, the term quality dated back to the Latin substantive 'qualitas' – consistency or character, and 'qualis' –how made or of which manner? This cumulatively indicates the consistency of character that is stemmed from best deeds or performances (Bernhard, 2012).

The understanding of quality has also been evolved over time. In this regard, Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) point out that quality is a concept long been associated with the manufacturing sector; and it has become a critical concern of HEIs since the emergence of the medieval universities and other educational institutions, notably in the continent Europe. At the very outset, the concept of quality was used in the field of medicine with a sense of feature or character. Nevertheless, later on, in the seventeenth century, the term was employed in the language of merchandising under the guise of the French term 'qualité'; after that, it earned various technical and systematic connotations (Bernhard, 2012).

In actual fact, at present, the term quality is taken as a ‘slippery concept’ that is not as such easier even to describe and discuss than convey in practice (Pfeffer & Coote, 1991). Bernhard (2012) and Stensaker (2004) have also remarked that although quality plays a crucial role in the realm of higher education, there is no universally valid and generally accepted meaning and explanation for it; but rather it is a matter of negotiation among multiple stakeholders and actors. As a corollary, quality in the milieu of higher education has been taken as a hotly debated, complex, and multidimensional concept (UNESCO, 2010), to which different people need to have their own versatile interpretations.

At this juncture, some researchers in the field have disclosed that the following three points can be traced as significant challenges to unequivocally define and spell out quality. Firstly, quality is an elusive and subtle term for which there is a wide variety of interpretations and connotations depending on the views of different stakeholders or parties (Bobby, 2014). Meaning, quality is relative to the user of the term and the circumstances in which it is indulged (Harvey & Green, 1993). Therefore, Harvey and Green further emphasize on the fact that the importance of comprehending various conceptions of quality from the vantage points of the stakeholders and actors to make sense of their preferences, and thereby to address them in an appropriate manner as possible.

Secondly, quality is a multidimensional concept (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). For Van Vught (1994), quality is an overly sensitive, multifaceted, and subjective concept. Hence, diminishing such a convoluted concept or idea to a one-sentence precise definition or characterization is so problematic. That means, it may lack to embrace multilayered notions and specificity, or it could be too general to be adequately operationalized (Eagle & Brennan, 2007). Thirdly, quality is not a static entity, but rather a dynamic and ever-changing pursuit of excellence that needs to be considered in the milieu of the larger educational, economic, political, and social landscape (Harvey, 2014). Like it holds true for the aforementioned two challenges, this notion of the concept quality also leads the meaning of the term to be too obscured (not to be easily grasped and understood).

In a similar vein, UNESCO (2011) pinpoints two possible reasons as causes for the teething troubles in defining the term quality in the ambit of higher education. First, there is no consensus on the very intents of higher education, be it the production of qualified and skilled human power,

training for a research undertaking, or a matter of extending services for public engagements at large. Second, activities in HEIs are believed to be multidimensional and complex, and they are expected to be accomplished based on the interrelationship established among teachers, learners, and other stakeholders. In this light, it is not that simple to clutch the interaction and transaction of inputs and throughputs (process), and what exactly determines the outputs as well. Thus, those two typical features of HEIs or higher education as a sector, lead the concept quality needs to have its own peculiar characterizations than its ordinary meanings.

For instance, Birnbaum (as cited in Papadimitriou, 2011) has made a survey and tried to compile definitions of quality based upon the views and opinions of different actors and stakeholders in the higher education sector. Ultimately, Birnbaum has attempted to come up with three distinct dimensions of quality in higher education:

- the meritocratic, which refers to an institution's orthodoxy and conformity to professional and scholarly norms and traditions with academic professionals as a reference group;
- the social, which deals largely with the degree to which an institution satisfies the needs and desires of important collective constituents; and
- the individualistic, which refers to the contributions a certain institution make to the holistic and versatile personal growth and development of students.

The other and perhaps the most widely known quality conceptions are, what have been forwarded by the famous researchers in the field of quality i.e., Harvey and Green (1993). According to Harvey and Green, the meanings of quality (in education) can be synthesized as 'excellence or exceptional', which particularly links to the idea of fineness or distinction with high standards of academic achievement; 'perfection or consistency' that is achieved by setting and establishing specifications, and ensuring zero defects or errorless; 'value for money', which is viewed as a return on investment, accountability, or efficacy; 'transformative' that considers quality as an ongoing process that entertains empowerment and enhancement of satisfaction; and as 'fitness for purpose', where the product or service meets the stated purpose, meaning that fitting customer specifications, needs, and priorities as they are defined by the providers (see Figure 2.1, below).

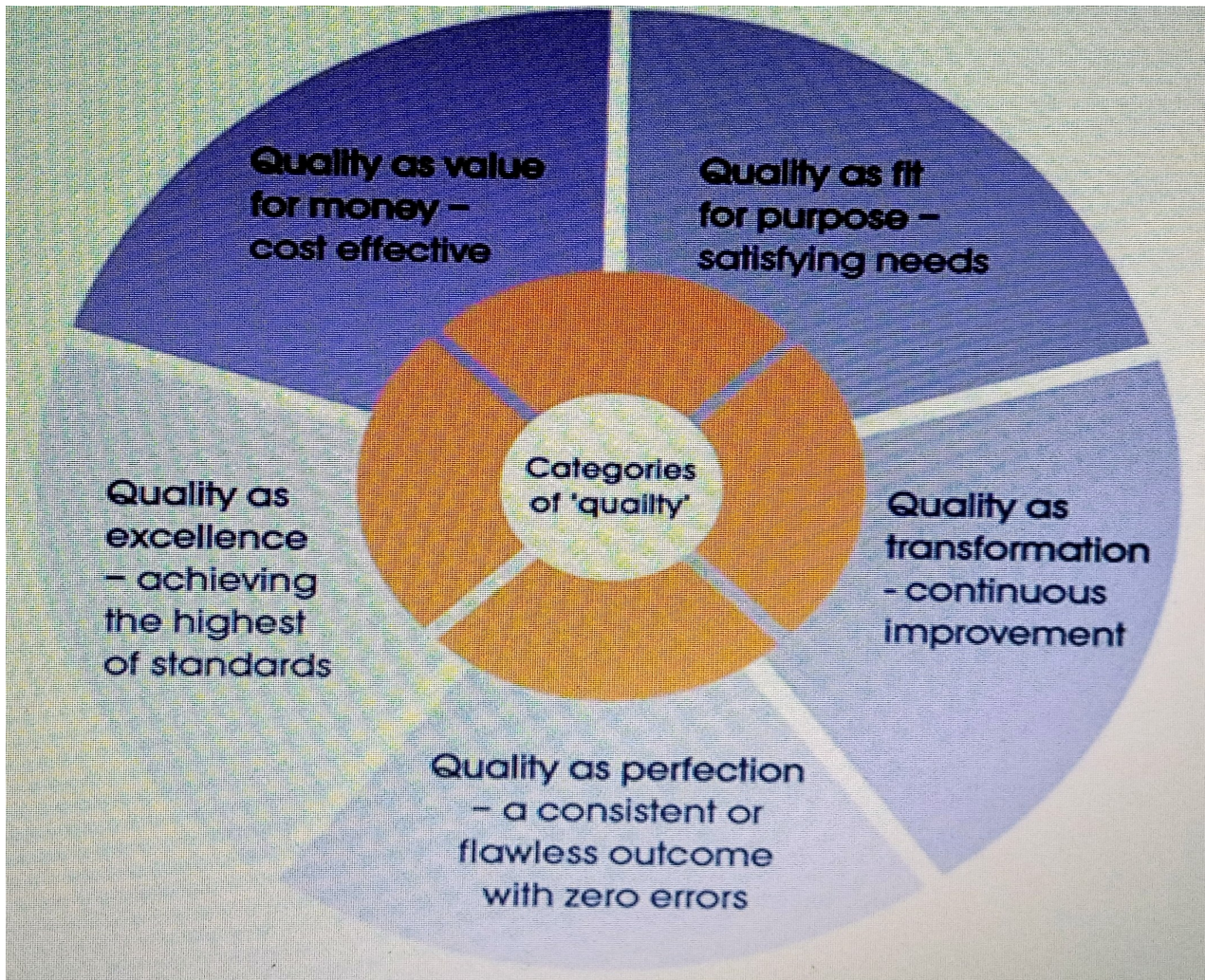


Figure 2.1 Harvey and Green's Conceptions of Quality in Higher Education

Source: Matei and Iwinska (2016, p. 15)

Those five perspectives to quality reflect a wide array of meanings ranging from the traditional notion of quality as excellence to focusing on processes that aim to meet perfection (consistency), mission orientation and consumer specification (fitness for purpose), and the transformative quality through empowering the consumers and enhancing their satisfaction in the due process (Harvey & Green, 1993).

In brief, after considering those standpoints and conceptions, which are uttered towards quality (in line with the complex nature of the term quality *per se*, and the fluid context of higher education),

it is possible to boldly deduce that there is no one, single best definition of quality that works for and fits correctly in all circumstances.

Regarding quality assurance, like quality, it is a very intricate concept that has been portrayed in diverse ways according to one's purpose and context he/she has. In this respect, the literature review has indicated the presence of so many characterizations in quality assurance in the realm of higher education. For Harman and Meek (2000), quality assurance can be conceptualized as a systematic management and assessment procedure that is adopted by HEIs and higher education systems to monitor performance against objectives and ensure achievements of quality improvements and quality outputs. Harman and Meek have further elaborated that with undertaking quality assurance in higher education, the stakeholders and other pressure groups become confident about the management of quality and the concomitant possible outcomes to be achieved.

Similarly, for Martin and Stella (2007), "quality assurance is an all-inclusive terminology referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, maintaining, improving, and guaranteeing) the quality of a higher education system, institutions, or programs" (p. 34). Inside the scenes of higher education systems, quality assurance also refers to the relevant policies, attitudes, actions, and procedures that are necessary to make sure that quality is being maintained and enhanced (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). This has shown that quality assurance is not only about establishing standards or criteria against which to judge the quality or find out the degree to which the product or service is met those prescribed specifications, but also it is about ensuring that there are systems and strong quality cultures in effect to guarantee that the desired quality and provision of quality education in a given HEI are well-attained (Harman & Meek, 2000).

In conclusion, quality assurance can be broadly understood as a process in which the most decisive features and activities of the higher education system are measured and regulated. To this end, perhaps the quality assurance practice is tightly linked with critical concepts like performance, standards, norms, accreditation, outcomes, and accountability to serve as a bedrock foundation to safeguard quality in the ambiance of higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). However, the mere existence of quality assurance systems and mechanisms do

not automatically mean that the quality and the provision of quality education in HEIs is of good level or standard (Martin & Stella, 2007).

2.2. Purposes/Functions of Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in higher education needs to serve or achieve different purposes. In this regard, several research studies have enumerated a plethora of reasons why quality assurance is so imperative for HEIs. For example, as to Adegbesan (2011), accountability and improvement can be seen as the dual-core building blocks of quality assurance in HEIs in many parts of the world (though the degree of emphasis differs from one place or context to the other). While according to Harvey (1999), quality monitoring or assurance procedures are used to serve a variety of purposes that can be grouped into three: accountability, improvement, and information.

The first purpose of quality assurance is said to be accountability. Accountability inherently refers to the obligation to report to others, to explain, justify, and answer questions about how resources have been used, to what extent, and possibly at what effect (Trow, 2000). As Alshamy (2011) underscores, accountability usually employs summative and judgmental approaches aiming at external oversight and control of quality.

More specifically, in the ambit of higher education, accountability comprises three broad concerns. First, accountability to external funders (or government), that ensures public money is spent appropriately. Second, accountability to higher education sectors, that ensures their obedience to the underlying quality standards or criteria. The third one is accountability to customers to make sure that an appropriate experience is provided (Massy, 1997). Therefore, it seems to be important in conducting quality assurance within a HEI that all stakeholders are made aware of their responsibilities in the process of maintaining and assuring quality (Albaqami, 2015).

The second significant purpose of quality assurance is an improvement. Improvement is most frequently meant to instigate and encourage institutions to reflect upon their own practices, and to develop what they do next. To serve this objective, improvement mostly utilizes formative approaches where the focus is on quality enhancement and improvement than control (Harvey, 1999). In this light, quality improvement can be traced as process-based or measured by gradual student learning gains and outputs (Thune, 1996). As is revealed by Brown (2011), if such strong

improvement-based quality assurance protocols are set in place in a certain HEI, the leaders and other workers likely to work to the best level of their abilities to help the institution remain consonant with those standards.

The third major intention of a quality assurance or monitoring procedure is to breed valid information for funders to aid funding allocation decisions, and thus link to accountability and information for stakeholders to help them make their own informed choices (Harvey, 1999; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004).

At this level, Mulu (2012) and Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) have underscored that by excluding the third purpose of quality assurance, there is a continuous contest exists in the quality assurance literature on whether the emphasis of quality assurance ought to be restricted towards accountability or improvement. In the meantime, accountability versus improvement-oriented quality assurance practices dichotomize quality assurance activities and deeds as external and internal, based on how the quality assurance exercise is initiated, who owns the practice, and the resulting impact on HEIs (Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Mulu, 2012).

Furthermore, UNESCO (2010) enumerates different functions of quality assurance systems that are closely related with the aforementioned major purposes that include: assessments that take place for the initial opening of academic programs and institutions (it is commonly known by the name licensing, and leading to the status of a publicly recognized entity); supervision of the current functions and performances of programs and institutions (this is mostly linked with the fulfillment of minimum standards in the course of program or service delivery); accreditation (this ensures stakeholders that minimum standards are being met); professional certification of graduates in selected professional fields; and the provision of information on the recognition and accreditation status of both institutions and academic programs. Indeed, those functions are in one way or another linked with different quality assurance arrangements i.e., EQA and IQA.

2.3. Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education

For Matei and Iwinska (2016) and Odera-Kwach (2011), there are two principal types of quality assurance systems or practices in HEIs. These are: internal –intra-institutional or institutional, and external –inter/supra-institutional.

In the literature, the two quality assurance schemes are found to be the most generic modalities that are used to improve and ensure quality and provision of quality education in HEIs. Moreover, the EQA and IQA systems are also regarded as popular and widely used arrangements in the context of higher education throughout the world (Neubauer & Hawkins, 2011).

As to Loukola and Zhang (2010), the commencement of both IQA and EQA systems are closely linked to the massification of higher education or HEIs, the tremendous increment of investment and doubts concerning the possibility of maintaining quality following the new phenomena, and the belief that exists about the importance of higher education in the new knowledge society and knowledge economy. However, still, there are power tensions that manifested between the inherent intensions of EQA and IQA systems amidst their implementations in HEIs. Henceforward, the discussion conducts on each type of quality assurance procedure, and the concomitant power tensions afterward.

2.3.1. Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)

Martin and Stella (2007) have pointed out that internal or institutional quality assurance refers to the policies and mechanisms that are implemented in an institution (or on its respective programs) to ensure that it is fulfilling its own purposes and meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the specific profession or discipline in particular. Martin and Stella further affirm that IQA may also be a response to external pressures or legal enforcements, but the processes and practices are essentially adapted and operated by HEIs themselves.

For Parri (2006) and Utuka (2012), IQA primarily aims at ensuring institutional development and internal accountability in a HEI. In this regard, IQA concentrates mainly on academic issues and matters, and places emphasis on collecting evidence and information about mission fulfillment, the efficiency of activities, and ways of ensuring quality, within an institution (Hall, 2006). In doing so, IQA systems and practices enable an institution to supervise and manage its own quality-related activities in an ongoing manner.

Additionally, as is stated by Firehiwot (2014), particularly IQA and other similar quality-assuring initiatives in HEIs have a lot of merits. Some of them are:

- instigate institutions and their staff members to take good care of the quality of their activities and performances without waiting for pressure from outside;
- help institutions to identify their own strengths and weaknesses in their own ways;
- create a good quality culture within an institution or educational units in it;
- foster social cohesion and a culture of teamwork among staff members; and
- enhance staff accountability.

While González (2008) claims that even if IQA is so advantageous, there is no single best system that applies to all universities at a time. Instead, each university has to build up and customize its own system that can best suit its real context, and drive the intrinsic and extrinsic requirements or standards up to the needed levels (Loukola & Zhang, 2010).

In general, Manyaga (2008) notes that since IQA systems are essentially controlled by the HEIs themselves, they are fully institutional and less accountability-driven, and ultimately they are aspiring for institutional self-reflection and improvement. In this way, IQA often will form a base for external quality monitoring and assurance that may take place in an institution (Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Nguyen, 2012).

2.3.2. External Quality Assurance (EQA)

According to Martin and Stella (2007), quality assurance agencies use the term EQA to represent different practices that serve various purposes in the contexts of higher education. Nonetheless, based on the common binding features, EQA refers to the systems that are designed and operated by an external agency or body that resides outside of HEIs (notably the HERQA in the Ethiopian context), often mandated by regulatory legal acts, to monitor the quality and the provision of quality education in tertiary education institutions (Tesfaye, 2015).

As to Smeby and Stensaker (1999), EQA is mostly associated with external stakeholders like the state and regional accrediting bodies, governmental or public agencies than HEIs themselves. This implies that EQA usually operates at a national level, and it has fixed and somewhat universal regulations, which can be applied to all relevant institutions under their legal prerogative and jurisdiction without or with little consideration to the specific realities of respective institutions (Matei & Iwinska, 2016; Smeby & Stensaker, 1999). However, HEIs as an integral part of their core activities, have to bear the responsibility to convince their customers or clients, the state, and

society in general, as they are committed to the fulfillment of the external requirements (El-Khawas, 2007; Tesfaye, 2015).

As far as the major aim of an EQA system is concerned, Utuka (2012) reveals that it is most frequently sought to serve accountability in HEIs. In this respect, enforcement of accountability intends to reassure external stakeholders on the levels of quality in HEIs that is acceptable or of a high standard, and the international comparability of both public and private higher education providers (Harvey & Green, 1993). To this effect, EQA schemes try to ensure that whether there is an obedience to the set of standard guidelines in HEIs or not (Ogula & Jane as cited in Misgana, 2013). In many countries of the world, these standards are entrenched in more or less around the following wide-ranging topical areas:

- missions and educational aims;
- governance and management system;
- teaching, learning, and pupils assessment and evaluation;
- infrastructure and learning resources;
- learner support services;
- research, consultancy, and extension; and
- IQA (Martin & Stella, 2007).

Regarding the scope of EQA system, UNESCO (2010) affirms that it may deal with the entire higher education system or with some segments like university and/or non-university sector, public and/or private HEIs, etc. Irrespective of the variations of HEIs, Smeby and Stensaker (1999) have suggested that quality regulating agencies and other stakeholders need to consider the following points to successfully materialize EQA systems. The first one is related to the presence of an independent agent or agency to conduct EQA in HEIs. The second point emphasizes the professional competence of an EQA agency. The third aspect is about the standardization of evaluation methods and procedures. The fourth one is concerned with the nomination and appointment of professional assessors and evaluators. The fifth aspect is dealing with the issue of how external evaluations are strictly followed up at institutional and national levels.

Generally, EQA arrangements have been criticized for strongly espousing a compliance culture rather than ensuring improvement in HEIs (Harvey & Green, 1993). Likewise, as Mulu (2012)

states, improvement-led quality assurance is well-entrenched in the assumption that quality and provision of quality education highly lean on the internal processes of institutions, and therefore they are going to be assured by making use of IQA systems than EQA mechanisms. Nonetheless, Baryeh (2009) appeals that in addition to accountability, EQA schemes ought to strive for quality improvement as well in HEIs (though Amaral (2007) claims that improvement and accountability/control are remained to be the two contradictory intents of external/quality assurance systems in the sphere of higher education).

2.3.3. The Power Tensions in Higher Education Quality Assurance (Schemes)

As it has already been said, quality assurance systems (EQA and IQA) majorly work for the purpose of accountability and improvement in HEIs. As to Nguyen (2016), especially EQA focuses on accountability (or control), and it is mostly compliance-driven. While IQA emphasizes improvement, and in this respect, it is an improvement-driven. Massy (1997) also describes that accountability usually provides the proximate motivation for externally steered and structured quality assessment, whereas improvement offers the motivation for institutionally initiated and ran quality assessment.

In this sense, quality assurance systems have created power tensions between accountability and improvement in the context of higher education around the world. For instance, advocates of the improvement-led approach view quality mainly as a process of transformation, and they attempt to shift its principal focus from external scrutiny to internal creative innovation (Bernhard, 2012; Harvey, 1995; Harvey & Williams, 2010). Conversely, proponents of the accountability-driven approach affirm that improvement can be a result of accountability, and it has to be a secondary mission in the course of a quality monitoring process (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Meaning that accountability goals generally embrace improvement as an indirect and implicit benefit, and internal quality assessment processes can be used as elements of externally driven quality monitoring activities (Massy, 1997, 2003).

Nevertheless, Westerheijden and Van Vught (1994) have noted that although accountability-driven approaches to quality assurance may lead to initial improvement, they have no guarantee for a long-term benefit that enables an institution to instill a vibrant and strong quality culture.

Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) have also shared this standpoint and recommend that improvement ought to be the priority aim of any HEI, with accountability as a consequence.

In a nutshell, amidst of implementing different quality assurance schemes in HEIs, such power tensions are seemed to be perpetuating. For quality assurance policy-makers worldwide and scholars in the field, the critical puzzling question here is how HEIs can resolve the apparent tensions between accountability –the necessity to comply or control, and improvement –the requirement to change (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Nguyen, 2016).

2.4. General Approaches to External/Quality Assurance in Higher Education

According to Harvey (2008), the entire process of higher education external/quality assurance, in general, falls into three types of major activities: accreditation, auditing/quality audit, and assessment (see Table 2.1, below). Henceforth, the discussion conducts in connection with each element.

Table 2.1 A Comparison of General Approaches to EQA

Activity	Key Question/s	Emphasis	Outcome
Accreditation	Are you good enough to be approved?	Comprehensive (i.e., mission, resources, and somewhat process and outcome-oriented)	Yes/No Pass/Fail
Quality Audit	Are you achieving your own objectives? Are your processes effective?	Mostly process-oriented	Qualitative description
Assessment/Evaluation	How good are your outputs?	Mostly output-oriented	Grade (including Pass/Fail)

Source: Adapted from Matei and Iwinska (2016, p. 48)

2.4.1. Accreditation

The term accreditation in higher education was initially originated from the USA, but it has been evolved and adopted internationally over the years (Utuka, 2012). As to Harvey and Newton (2004), accreditation is a process resulting in a decision that guarantees an institution, or an academic program that dwells in a HEI. Similarly, accreditation is often perceived to be emphasized on certification or recognition that is granted to an institution or respective academic programs in it for meeting minimum standards set by an external accreditation agency or other professional body or organization (Rath, 2010).

For Darojat (2013), the prime purpose of accreditation is to foster quality and ensure its continuous improvement in HEIs. This objective can be achieved mainly through a special form of quality assessment and monitoring process in which HEIs, degree types, and academic programs are systematically evaluated to get an official stamp of approval after an accreditation process is completed successfully (Baryeh, 2009; Ibrahim, 2014). Globally, in many countries, institutions and their educational programs seek a status of accreditation as a means of demonstrating their academic quality to the students and the public at large, and to become eligible for government funds, which are entitled to it (Quality Assurance and Accreditation Division [QAAD], 2013).

As it has been repeatedly mentioned before, accreditation as an external/quality assurance approach, is mostly embedded in institutions or academic programs. Institution-based accreditation typically refers to accreditation of an entire institution, which encompasses all its infrastructure, academic programs, and methods of (instructional) delivery, devoid of any profound and special implication towards the quality of different academic programs in an accredited institution (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). Moreover, Harvey and Mason (1995) argue that institutional-wide accreditation is done most usually based upon an evaluation or assessment of whether a given institution satisfies predetermined minimum (input) standards such as staff profiles/qualifications, research activities, student intake, learning resources, etc. Nonetheless, sometimes institution-based accreditation might also be based on a guesstimate of the potential for a given HEI to be able to produce graduates that meet or satisfy versatile, explicit, or implicit academic standards or professional competencies (Harvey, 2008).

While in program-based accreditation, educational programs in HEIs can be accredited in terms of their academic status and capabilities to produce graduates with the necessary professional qualities and competencies (Harvey & Mason, 1995). Unlike institutional accreditation, program accreditation largely stresses specific standards for curriculum and course content in individual units or programs, and in this case, it usually takes place in HEIs by specialized or discipline-based accrediting bodies or organs (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). In so doing, mainly input aspects, notably staffing, relevant resources, and curricula and contents of subject matters; and occasionally, the teaching and learning process and the level of student support; and some aspects of outcomes, which include the capability of graduates and their level employability are expected to be well-addressed (Harvey, 2008).

In all cases, Harvey (2002b) divulges that accreditation comprises a set of procedures, which are catered to gather evidence to reach a decision to be made as to whether a given institution or an academic program ought to be granted a status of accreditation or not. For Harvey and Newton (2004), the specific methods of accreditation include self-assessments; document reviews; scrutiny of performance indicators; peer review and visits; surveys, inspections, and supervisions; discussion forums or panels with different key actors and stakeholders; and observation of classroom teaching or assessment of learners.

In conclusion, an accreditation agency/organ may commonly use a three-stage process to monitor quality and provision of quality education in HEIs (Martin & Stella 2007). The first step involves conducting self-evaluation and providing relevant information to the accrediting agency. The second step comprises undertaking a site visit by an external review team to validate the self-assessment report. The third and final step is a stage at which ultimate decisions will be made regarding the status of accreditation of an institution or a program (Martin & Stella, 2007).

2.4.2. Quality Audit

Conceptually, a quality audit is somewhat different from an assessment and accreditation in that it mainly attempts to judge the degree to which a certain HEI (or one of its sub-units) has an institutional quality monitoring system in effect that reveals its strengths and weaknesses (UNESCO, 2010). Therefore, Woodhouse (2003) states that a quality audit is a systematic assessment of the approaches/mechanisms of quality assurance systems in an institution to ensure

that they are all-inclusive enough to serve their purposes. In brief, it is a matter of checking to confirm whether a given institution fits for its core intents or not, by a recognized external quality regulating body.

This indicates that quality audit principally focuses on an institution's: reporting approaches and mechanisms; data gathering methods on teaching and learning and assessment processes; capability of surveying on the students, graduates, and employers' satisfaction; and as a whole, mechanisms in effect to tackle the major quality bottlenecks, and thereby to ensure continuous quality improvement (UNESCO, 2011). Furthermore, UNESCO (2011) reflects that since quality audit more emphasizes process aspects, it is thus very much in line with the improvement objective of quality assurance. Nonetheless, neither quality audit does lead purely to certification of a particular level of expected quality, nor to the comparability of quality levels, which might be the case in quality assessment (UNESCO, 2010).

In the end, Masehela (2015) recapitulates that an audit would usually commence when a HEI preparing a document based on evaluation of its activities and performances against the predetermined criteria. This self-evaluation text can serve as a critical basis for a team of an external panel to conduct a visit and inspection in the institution. Panel members in their visit to a HEI may look for possible pieces of evidence to cross-check the claims that are offered in the SED. Eventually, relying on the underlying assumptions in the national quality assurance system (of a country), decisions perhaps be made on the institution under review, and then possible actions may also be required to be taken (Masehela, 2015; UNESCO, 2011).

2.4.3. Assessment

Assessment mostly concerns with the evaluation of quality and provision of quality education in HEIs (QAAD, 2013). According to Harvey and Newton (2004), assessment usually passes a judgment about the level of quality of teaching and learning processes or research activities that take place in educational institutions. In this light, an assessment process is meant to collect data, information, and shreds of evidence on the status of quality of HEIs –institution-wide assessment or their core activities, which include teaching-learning, research initiatives and undertakings, and community engagements or services, and separately on specific academic programs that dwell in the institutions –program-based assessment (QAAD, 2013).

Regarding the scope, for QAAD (2013), sometimes assessment or evaluation goes beyond gauging the common quality monitoring methods and procedures and tries to judge the quality of input, process, and output, in connection with the higher education system (though it is also considered as an outcome-based one, for example, see Table 2.1, above).

In brief, unlike a quality audit, an assessment of quality is dealing with the actual process of judging the level of quality of tertiary education institutions and their respective academic programs. Moreover, as one of the strategies or mechanisms of external/quality assurance systems in higher education, the assessment does not necessarily lead to an official accreditation decision. However, formal accreditation still greatly needs to be inspired by the results of quality assessments that take place in HEIs (The Government of Ghana [GOG], 2016; QAAD, 2013).

2.5. Specific Strategies/Methods to Higher Education Quality Assurance

Besides the general approaches or mechanism, which are elucidated before, in higher education quality assurance there is a tendency to commonly use three basic strategies/methods (Alshamy, 2011; Matei & Iwinska, 2016): self-review (self-study or -assessment), peer review, and external review.

The first specific method of quality assurance is said to be self-assessment. For Utuka (2012), self-assessment or review is a form of action research or an organizational intervention that mainly focuses on the real and practical concerns of an institution. Likewise, Rediet (2014) states that in self-review, HEIs try to examine their performances and achievements against their mission statements and other prespecified objectives. Consequently, the result of such an internal evaluation method is purely organization-specific, and it may not be liable to be generalized to other institutions (Utuka, 2012).

Overall, self-review, as a specific method of quality assurance in higher education, encourages institutions to be self-evaluative and self-reflective and eventually creates opportunities to devising their future enhancement plans (QAA as cited in Rediet, 2014). Therefore, it is demanded to be in place in an ongoing manner through which higher education organizations evaluate and make a judgment about their own: performances, major strengths and essential areas for improvement, and necessary plan for actions (Utuka, 2012). However, Harman and Meek (2000) have noted that beyond its institutional significance, a self-assessment or review quality assurance

method can serve as the best catalyst for or the linking pin between internal and external quality assessments that are in effect in HEIs.

The other quality assurance method or strategy in higher education is peer review. Utuka (2012) has asserted that peer review in the sector of higher education is not a new phenomenon. Rather, it is a regular academic process that has long been established, especially in the area of research and other related educational activities in HEIs (Matei & Iwinska, 2016). Thus, the peer review process can be undertaken by some group of people in HEIs such as teachers, academicians, researchers, and other practitioners (Rediet, 2014).

According to Harvey (2002a), among other things, the peer review results are usually influenced by peer reviewers' level of training, and their previous experiences and preconceptions about the topic to be reviewed. In regard to the merit, when peer review is particularly used in combination with self-study or assessment, there might be a great possibility to effectively manage and monitor quality and provision of quality education in HEIs (Harman & Meek, 2000).

The third specific method of quality assurance in higher education is an external review. Like other methods, external review or examination is a well-established strategy to quality assurance systems in higher education around the world (Utuka, 2012). For Rediet (2014), external review as a method of quality assurance systems, enables the performance assessment of a certain institution to be carried out internally as a prerequisite for external examination. In this way, it is still appeared to be acknowledged as an effective way of ensuring quality and provision of quality education in HEIs (Brandt & Stensaker as cited in Utuka, 2012).

In general, Stensaker, Brandt, and Solum (2008) have asserted that the external review method has dual purposes. That is, to ensure the comparability of degrees or diplomas that are awarded by different institutions with respect to national or academic benchmarks or standards, and to treat learners/students fairly after/via ascertaining a certain distance between teachers and those teachers' assessors.

2.6. The Rise/Growth of Quality Assurance

Historically, the quality (quality assurance) movement can be traced back to medieval Europe, in the late thirteenth century, where craftsmen and other educational personnel of the time had begun

formally grouping them into unions that were known by the name ‘guilds’ in their respective organizations or institutions (Shah, 2011). According to Charles (2007), at that time, particularly some learning institutions or educational organizations had managed to maintain and sustain their institutional quality through such congregations. For instance, students and professors of the time had been established their own guilds and master guilds, respectively in some countries of the world collectively, to work on the quality of higher educational organizations, and to ensure the effectiveness of different academic programs amidst their actual operations in those institutions (Charles, 2007; Shah, 2011).

Nevertheless, after a long journey since the 1980s, the contexts of HEIs have been started to be highly influenced by (and entangled with) several global forces and circumstances such as globalization and internalization, aggressive use of the newly emerging technologies like ICTs, the massification of access, competition among institutions, commercialization of higher education, and accountability in higher education (Hallak & Poisson, 2007).

Following these new global phenomena, especially from the 1990s onwards, there has been a radical change in the higher education policy context worldwide, and after that quality has unquestionably become one of the most fundamental concerns in many HEIs (Vann, 2012). As a corollary to this, Lee (2008) notes that quality management techniques and modalities from the industry began to be adopted in many tertiary educational institutions around the world.

Of course, such quality management approaches were often criticized as they were too statistical, and not effective as such, to adequately tackle multifaceted aspects in the sphere of higher education (Roth, 2013; Vann, 2012). The inconveniences of the application of the industrial quality management models and approaches, in the forthcoming decades, urged for the launching of new quality assurance frameworks or theories in the higher education sector, and in turn for the establishment of quality assurance agencies and centers for the sake of assuring quality against some standards or criteria in HEIs (Vann, 2012).

After these essential landmarks, during the latter half of the twentieth century, the concepts and practices of quality assurance had found somewhat better ways to be extensively operationalized in tertiary education institutions in many parts of the world (Dill, 2010). In this regard, many developing nations on the footpaths of developed countries have adapted quality assurance

mechanisms, strategies, and procedures to uphold the quality of their higher education provision (Martin & Stella, 2007).

In conclusion, the popularity of the quality assurance business internationally in the higher education sector has resulted in the mushrooming of relevant intrinsic and extrinsic means of managing and monitoring the quality of education that is being offered by/in HEIs (Utuka, 2012). Based on their eminent positive contributions, Hussain (2011) avows that internal and external quality enhancement and assurance approaches are at present (become) acknowledged and pursued among various actors and stakeholders in HEIs throughout the world.

2.7. Major Quality Assurance Models in Higher Education

While exploring quality assurance literature in higher education, one can come across various models or frameworks in quality assurance that are developed in different contexts over time. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) have remarked that initially there had been attempts to apply models, which were designed for the sake of industrial quality management to the context of higher education. More recently, however, various new models for educational quality management and/or assurance have been developed and proposed. Therefore, in this research study, a few major quality management and other higher education quality assurance models are selected for a very short review. These models are chosen based on (a lot of) their possible applications in the milieu of the Ethiopian higher education sector.

2.7.1. Total Quality Management (TQM) Model

TQM is in short, an organization-wide commitment or promise to permeating quality into every activity and exercise for aspiring continuous improvement (Daft & Marcic, 2006; Heizer & Render, 2005). Woodhouse (2003) also notes that as the TQM model is markedly people-oriented and participative in its very nature, it inherently assumes that a quality culture is an integral part of and a sine qua non for an organization and that all line functions within a certain organization are adjoining with quality. As a consequence, all members of an organization are quite responsible for quality assurance (maintenance and improvement), and in that regard, quality is not a centralized activity, but it has to be devolved to various functional levels in an organization (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2004).

Historically, the TQM approach had proved particularly effective in post-World War II Japan, where its industry gained a significant market place competitive advantage over its American and European market competitors (Vazzana & Winter, 1993). However, Finn (2014) underscores that of all industrial quality monitoring mechanisms, which are adopted in the sector of education, the TQM has been the most widely espoused one all over the world.

There are some underlying principles in the TQM model, which have made it popular throughout the world. For instance, Berghe (as cited in Mulu, 2012) and Heizer and Render (2005) have uncovered some of them as:

- customer focus,
- continuous quality improvement,
- institutional or IQA process,
- management and leadership diligence,
- engagement of all actors at all levels,
- teamwork,
- systematic problem-solving, and
- seeking for authentic and genuine information.

Nonetheless, since the TQM model has initially formulated and long been served peculiarly for managing (manufacturing) industries than educational and academic matters (Harvey & Williams, 2010), there is an argument that the model is not always suitable for monitoring quality in HEIs (Mulu, 2012). In line with this, for example, David (2003) has reflected his views that the TQM model may not be appropriate for all organizations in all circumstances because ensuring continuous quality improvement is very pricey as it demands more trained and well-experienced academic staff members and exclusive learning facilities, which may not be affordable in all contexts and countries of the world. On the other hand, Sahney, Banwet, and Karunes (2004) have strongly argued that the TQM model is one of the contemporary approaches in organizational quality management, which is applicable to adequately monitor various activities even in educational institutions. In this sense, applying at least some aspects of the TQM model in the current contexts of higher education would likely augment efforts to beef up quality in HEIs.

2.7.2. International Organization for Standardization (ISO)

ISO is another contemporary quality management model. In research, especially the standards of ISO 9000 are one of the most common references (Bae, 2007; Heizer & Render, 2005; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2004). For Mishra (2006), the ISO 9000 standards are described as originally initiated for companies in the manufacturing industry to predict the degree of reliability of products, and thereby to ensure quality control in respective organizations. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, the application of these standards has spread into schools, and many HEIs have adopted the standards as an integral part of their quality management and monitoring systems (Stimson, 2003).

Regarding the aims of the ISO 9000 quality management system, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2004) expound that it is meant to improving conformity (of, for example, an academic program in a HEI) to specific criteria covering course or content design, way of delivery, and meeting customers' needs and desires.

Utuka (2012) has underscored that there are some benefits, which are derived from the putting in place of ISO 9000 quality management system into the higher education sectors. In this regard, as is posited by Utuka, one of the benefits is the advent of cultural transformation and the attitudinal change of staff members towards quality and provision of quality education in HEIs. The other benefit is that the ISO 9000 standards would urge educational organizations or HEIs to embark on a systematic intervention to their administrative headaches (Bae, 2007). In general, like the TQM model, the ISO has also bound to have something to contribute to scaffold the quality assurance endeavors in HEIs, in a country like Ethiopia.

2.7.3. The Transformative Model

This model is more entrenched in the transformative conception that the quality maintaining process in tertiary education institutions ought to focus on empowering participants and aspiring for the development or furtherance of a quality culture in an ongoing manner (Nguyen, 2016). Consequently, for Harvey and Knight (1996), the primary emphasis of the model places on the transformation of quality assurance systems and processes from sheer external inspection to somewhat internal effective actions that embrace the dual approaches such as bottom-up empowerment and top-down auditing.

As Harvey and Knight (1996) have further explained, the bottom-up empowerment approach requires the development of effective academic teams (i.e., among teachers, researchers, and students) to work actively on differentiating quality targets, planning for implementation, and reporting outcomes to achieve quality improvement in HEIs. While top-down auditing leads to quality improvement through an effective external monitoring process that takes into account a range of concerns and perspectives of diverse stakeholders in HEIs (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

In conclusion, according to the transformative model or perspective, quality assurance systems should be learner-centered and be targeted towards the enrichment of the learning experiences of students in an incessant manner (Mulu, 2012). Thus, this model has also something to contribute positively to HEIs in Ethiopia in their attempt to ensure quality education provision.

2.7.4. The Comprehensive Educational Quality Assurance Model

This is another popular quality assurance model in HEIs. As to Mulu (2012), the comprehensive educational quality assurance model is developed based on the incorporation of perspectives of different actors and stakeholders on the essence of quality assurance systems and other fundamental academic needs and cultures. In this regard, the model specifically intends to take for granted some critical issues such as vision or purpose, leadership and management, human resource development, customer satisfaction, continuous quality improvement, and organizational structures (Mulu, 2012; Nguyen, 2016) as key variables to determine the status of quality in a given HEI. It is worth noting at this point that the comprehensive educational quality assurance model is believed to have a lot of useful applications in the scope of HEIs in Ethiopia.

In all, from the aforementioned reviews conducted on different quality management or assurance models or frameworks, one can gain a variety of ideas and insights on the effective operationalization processes of quality assurance schemes in the ambiance of higher education. Hence, in this study, I have managed to make use of some relevant elements of these quality management and assurance models and frameworks to strengthen my theoretical base, to formulate the conceptual framework of the study, and eventually to deepen the analysis and discussions in line with the basic research questions. Otherwise, it is not my intention to compare each other and single out one quality assurance model that fits best in all circumstances, all the time, which is in fact unimaginable to exist.

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical Framework

Theories are in general quite imperative to provide the backcloth and the rationale for the research and the framework for a thoughtful understanding of a social phenomenon, and they also offer interpretation for research findings (Bryman, 2001, 2012). Specifically, in qualitative inquiry, the theory may appear at the beginning, and later on, it is modified or adjusted mostly based on views and perspectives of the informants in the study (Creswell, 2014). This indicates perhaps the need to compile and formulate a conceptual framework basically out of some underlying theoretical convictions and orientations to uncover important constructs in the study. Therefore, under this chapter, first, I have attempted to present briefly the theoretical issues to create the basis for the conceptual framework of the study. After that, the conceptual framework with all its companions is exclusively presented in a way to guide this comparative case study, which is primarily aimed to explore the actual EQA practices in the contexts of selected public and private universities in Ethiopia.

3.1. The Open System Perspective

Manning (2013) underscores that modern organizational theories, which have their own roots in the “open system perspective”, greatly stresses the significance of an organization’s environments. In this light, there seems to have been a general consensus among several of the scholars in the field that a certain organization does not and even cannot exist in a vacuum (since an organization does not persist like as an isolated island), but it ought to interrelate and interact with the environment to successfully attaining its fundamental targets (Abeya, 2014; Daft, 2007; Zucker, 1987). Also, Scott (1981) describes that organizations cannot be inherently characterized as closed systems, but rather they need to be open to and dependent on flows of peoples and other essential resources from outside of their systems. Meaning that organizations as open systems, can interchange with and respond to, for instance, the external environments, which may comprise: the political, social, economic, and other several powerful forces (Daft, 2007; Manning, 2013; Scott, 1981).

In this open system perspective, organizations are also most frequently perceived as systems that allure inputs of different kinds, from the environment, and after some time, they transform them, and finally release the outputs to the external environment in the form of standard goods and services (Manning, 2013). Manning goes on to expound that in light of this perspective, an organization, therefore, needs to be evaluated and judged on the basis of its capability to acquire and process the inputs, to properly channel the outputs, and eventually to uphold a lot of constancy and stability overall in its routine activities. In doing so, an open system perspective duly recognizes that environmental forces can maneuver and shape the structure and behavior of an organizational system and practice (the practice in it) in so many ways (Daft, 2007; Manning, 2013; Papadimitriou, 2011).

When it comes to HEIs, Mulu (2012) divulges that a HEI/university has to be first considered as an open system, to better understand it as an organization. In this respect, HEIs, most of the time, are declared to be dynamic and open systems and at the same time, continually interacting with their environment (Birnbaum as cited in Mulu, 2012). As a corollary to this underlying theoretical assumption, Manning (2013) boldly remarks that as open system organizations, to know more about HEIs and their functions and operations; how they are managed or controlled; and duties and roles of their staff members, including managers and administrators, academic personnel, and other auxiliary internal actors, they need to be viewed and explored deeply in the lights of different organizational theories.

Hence, in this study, the neo-institutional and the contingency organizational theories (in the open system perspective) deemed to be appropriate and served as lenses to investigate or understand the actual practices (i.e., the essence, implementation practices, and perceived outcomes) in relation to EQA particularly in the contexts of selected public and private degree-granting universities in Ethiopia. At this juncture, the major premise of the neo-institutional perspective is that practices in an organization are somewhat relied on and/or influenced by the institutional environment, while the cruxes in the contingency theory commend the importance and decisiveness of the technical or task environment on the fate of a certain activity that takes place in an organization (see Betts, 2003; Mulu, 2012; Zucker, 1987).

3.2. Neo-Institutional Theory

According to Mayer and Rowan (1977) and Sandhu (2018), the neo-institutional theory or organizational institutionalism (since it is firmly grounded in social constructivism) presumes that organizations need to function in an environment, which is mostly conquered by (social) rules, taken for granted assumptions or convictions, routines, and myths to ensure that they have acceptable and appropriate organizational structures and practices. Consequently, policies, procedures, and schemes in organizations are, most of the time, enacted by public views and opinions, inputs and decisions of actors and stakeholders, and laws, and in this case, they are often considered as legitimate institutional rules and programs that would likely operate as a rationalized myth in those organizations (Rowan, 1982; Zucker, 1987). In this respect, practices in HEIs can be well-studied via neo-institutional perspectives because such educational institutions have their own set of (social) rules that dispose of, shape, and ease the interface that exists within and among their constituencies (Daft, 2007; Khalil, 2017).

Above all, the neo-institutional theory firmly acknowledges the pressure of the institutional or external environment that can lead organizations to demonstrate a trend towards conformity i.e., isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). For Khalil (2017) and Sandhu (2018), isomorphism is simply referring to a move from differences or divergences to stability and convergence among different organizations, due to the quest for legitimacy from the external environment. Isomorphism usually happens, owing to the fact that there are coercive, imitative or mimetic, and normative forces as key integral parts of the external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1987).

Coercive isomorphism is the first and most renowned source of isomorphic organizational change. Such a change in an organization often takes place by the informal and formal pressures that are exerted by agencies or parties that handle and maneuver the necessary resources and power, and by anticipations of the society at large (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell further affirm that to secure, for example, essential resources and legitimacy, organizations may change or amend some of their structures and practices as well. Nonetheless, the organizational reconfigurations they can make sometimes perhaps be ceremonial. That is, merely to convey the message to multiple stakeholders that the organizations are responsive to the laws and regulations

of the government and they are also in harmony with the priority agendas of the general public (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Thomas & Meyer, 1984).

The second source of isomorphic organizational change is an imitative or mimetic isomorphism. This kind of organizational change emanates from the environmental qualms and uncertainties in which a given organization operates, and the pressure that is created by competitions among similar other organizations (Beckert, 2010). Hence, such an isomorphism entails the process of modeling that leads an organization to gain a better status and legitimacy in the eyes of different stakeholders (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Khalil, 2017).

Normative isomorphism, the third source of isomorphic organizational change that is closely linked with professionalization (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002). Professional networks most often create a common binding set of normative standards and practices in various fields of specializations, and in this respect, there is an overwhelming assumption that implementing them to examine performances can step up the legitimacy of an organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood et al., 2002; Khalil, 2017).

However, the coercive, mimetic, and normative forces are not supposed to impact different organizations (or institutions) the same way, all the time, the level of the effect of each force but rather depends on the individual organizational characteristics and other several miscellaneous attributing factors (Scott, 2001, 2013).

So, in the neo-institutional theory, legitimacy is taken as the most powerful concept in securing stability and ensuring the survival of an organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). Organizations, most of the time, engage in unpredictable situations to choose and employ a set of mechanisms that can help them to obtain their legitimacy from the pressure groups and other stakeholders (Csizmadia, 2006). At this moment, organizations may perhaps be prompted to manifest various ceremonial activities (i.e., symbolic compliance or institutional decoupling) to mollify the influential constituencies and the major public concerns (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In terms of the subject under investigation in this research study, this phenomenon can be interpreted that the higher education EQA system may be taken for granted, but it might not be as such properly materialized in degree-granting HEIs in the country.

In sum, as “institutional thought hinges on the premise that actors (individuals or organizations) are deeply affected by the constraints and expectations of their respective environment” (Sandhu, 2018, p. 1), the application of the neo-institutional theory in this comparative case study is therefore particularly paramount to take account of the influences of external or non-university-specific (rather than internal or university-specific) constructs upon the actual practices of higher education EQA in selected public and private universities in Ethiopia.

3.3. Contingency Theory

In the open system perspective, where an organization exists (in its own milieu) and continuously interacts with the external environment, the role of a contingency theory is so critical (Betts, 2003; Daft, 2007; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Scott, 1992). This is primarily because the environment in which an organization dwells and functions vastly determines the best ways of achieving the organizational objectives (Bess & Dee, 2008; Betts, 2003; Brown, 2012). Likewise, Hanson and Brown (as cited in Abeya, 2014) have noted that the contingency theory concentrates more on the internal adjustments and modifications of an organization to fulfill the changing desires in the organizational environment.

The central idea in the contingency theory is that there is no one and single best method of tackling technical tasks and activities, but rather it all depends upon the prevailing situations (inside and/or outside of an organization) (Daft, 2007; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). For Melan (1998), various internal contingencies are bound to be affected by the enormous pressure that comes from the environment such as organizational size, dimensions of the task environment, the structure of an organization, etc. Melan has continued to mention that the professional engagement and commitment of leaders and other internal actors in performing different activities that take place in an organization can also be taken as the other major internal contingencies that are likely to be affected by the environmental pressures. These all together determine the fate of specific tasks and activities, which are being in action in an organization.

In the contingency theory, there is another tenet that dictates that the congruity between the needs and desires of the environment and an organization leads to high performance, and it is commonly referred to as ‘fit’ (Anyamele, 2004; Daft, 2007; Donaldson, 2001; Drazin & Ven, 1985; Galbraith, 1973). This implies that “a closer fit between an organization and its environment

results in better organizational performance, whereas misfit leads to organizational problems” (Mulu, 2012, p. 71). Hence, organizations need to create a mechanism with which they can revisit and readjust their structures and practices to ensure a fit with the changing contextual circumstances, and thereby to attain a better performance (Betts, 2003; Donaldson, 2001, 2008; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Scott, 1992).

‘Uncertainty’ is also another key concept in the contingency theory. The degree of uncertainty in an environment in one way or another affects the internal features of a certain organization (Bess & Dee, 2008; Daft, 2007; Lawrence & Lorsch as cited in Mulu, 2012). As Daft and Lawrence and Lorsch have further stated, when things become more uncertain and indeterminate, organizations may indulge in a hard time in their attempt to acclimatize and survive.

In general, the contingency theory maintains that practices in a given organization have highly relied on the contingencies of circumstances in the organizational environment. In this respect, the theory asserts that it is quite important to understand the environment in which an organization exists and operates; if only that one can bring about a better arrangement and adjustment in his/her own organization (or institution). Therefore, the contingency theory is employed as another theoretical base and reference in this study, particularly to reflect on internal or university-specific (than external or non-university-specific) constructs, which still have their own repercussions on the actual practices of higher education EQA in selected degree-granting private and public universities in Ethiopia.

3.4. The Application of Organizational Theories in Quality Assurance Studies

Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) divulge that the institutional or organizational traits and behaviors, which are designated in different organizational theories can serve as fundamental prerequisites, to properly explore quality assurance related tasks and activities in HEIs. By the same token, Csizmadia (2006) and Kezar (2008) have boldly unveiled that organizational theories are quite relevant and appropriate in understanding and analyzing the practices of quality assurance in educational institutions. Accordingly, in this study, the neo-institutional and the contingency organizational theories are found to be important to uncover the institutional and technical issues, respectively, and to investigate how they can make an influence on the actual practices of EQA in selected public and private universities in Ethiopia.

More specifically, in regard to the application of the neo-institutional and the contingency theories, some researchers (e.g., Gupta, Dirsmith, & Fogarty, 1994; Mulu, 2012; Scott, 1995) have expounded that a complete understanding of different organizational practices (including quality assurance) can better be achieved, when those theoretical perspectives are going to be combined in a way to disclose important constructs both in the institutional and technical or task environments. Therefore, in this study, my intention is not to look for an ultimate merge of the two theories, but to find some (mutually) complementary issues from each of them to understand and analyze the subject under study. At this point, what has to be taken into serious consideration is that my study is not the first in its kind to employ the perspectives of the neo-institutional and the contingency theories together to study quality assurance issues, even in the same national context. For example, the PhD studies that were carried out by Mulu (2012) and Abeya (2014), made use of the two theories together to reveal the status of internal and external quality assurance practices in various public degree-granting HEIs in Ethiopia.

Beyond the national context, in many studies that were globally conducted in the areas of higher education quality assurance, researchers have applied (the ideas of) different organizational theories. For instance, in the study that was done by Csizmadia (2006) and entitled 'Quality Management in Hungarian Higher Education', the researcher employed the neo-institutional and the resource dependency theories mainly to apprehend how environmental pressures influence organizations, and in return institutions respond to those pressures at the organizational level. Similarly, Csizmadia, Enders, and Westerheijden (2008) studied the views and opinions of university leaders and academics on the quality assessment and evaluation systems (approaches) and their possible consequences at the institutional level with the help of the lens of the neo-institutional theory. Also, in other studies that were carried out by some researchers like Brown (2012), Clark (1998), and Sporn (1999), the contingency theory was applied to study critical issues in organizational adaptations in the ambit of different HEIs. Hence, from the above few examples, one can see the relevance and the usefulness of the neo-institutional and the contingency organizational theories, particularly in higher education (quality assurance) research.

3.5. Conceptual Framework of the Study

In this study, the conceptual framework is basically rooted in the neo-institutional and the contingency organizational theories and the quality assurance literature which served as a simple

guiding blueprint to frame the basic research questions, and thereby to lead (implicitly and/or explicitly) the whole research undertaking. In fact, since this study is qualitative, the conceptual framework is applied here in a way that does not impede the in-depth exploration and understanding of the real situation and the natural phenomenon in connection with the subject under investigation.

Particularly regarding the adoption of the two organizational theories in the conceptual framework, the study made use of the notions of the institutional and the task environments mainly to deal with the influences of the relevant external and internal constructs, respectively, upon the actual EQA practices in selected public and private universities in Ethiopia. To this end, the conceptual framework of the study emerges having three important dimensions, namely the external (institutional) environment, the internal (task or technical) environment, and the actual EQA practices. In this way, encompassing those essential elements, the conceptual framework is schematically depicted below (see Figure 3.1, below).

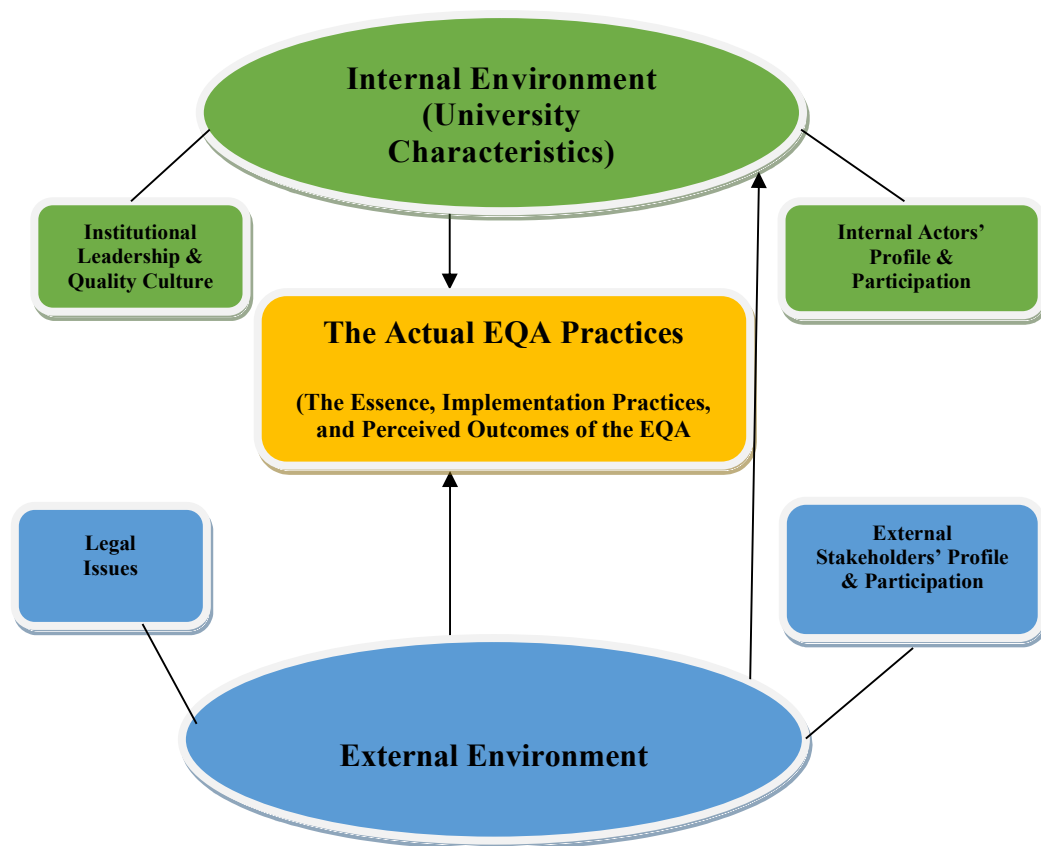


Figure 3.1. Conceptual Framework

In the above schema, the single arrows indicate the directions of the influence, and at the same time, the links that exist among the three major dimensions in the conceptual framework of the study. However, the other connecting lines were simply used show the key elements of or the leading constructs in the first two dimensions (external and internal environments) that are implicitly and/or explicitly treated to uncover the actual practices of EQA in selected institutions. Henceforth, the discussions and the contextual operationalizations are forwarded about each of the three dimensions and the respective integral parts as they are plotted in the conceptual framework.

3.5.1. External Environment

The external environment is the first dimension of the conceptual framework of the study, and it is inherently derived from the neo-institutional theoretical perspectives. According to Carroll and Huo (1986) and Zucker (1987), this dimension often concentrates on factors or issues which are there outside of organizations, but still affect or influence different organizational practices through norms, resources, and other constraints. By the same token, other researchers (e.g., Newton, 2000; Rowley, 1996; Scott, 1987, 2013) have divulged that even though the constructs of the external environment mostly dwell at the national or macro-level, they often impact the grassroots or micro-level activities, which take place in a certain organization. Based on this fact, therefore in this particular research study, the two essential constructs such as legal issues and external stakeholders' profile and participation are selected and treated under the realm of the external environment to unveil the actual practices of EQA in the contexts of selected public and private universities. The two aspects of the external environment are briefly elucidated as follows.

Legal Issues: Here, they may refer to the legislative and regulative aspects through which governments or other responsible agencies influence the operations or activities of an organization in various fields and aspects. This concept perhaps specifically embraces the government or public laws, acts, policies, and other sets of rules and regulations that are deciphered via actors' interpretations and meanings pertaining to their history, experiences, skills, resources, and contexts (Ball, 1993; Suchman & Edelman, 1997).

In relation to the subject here is under investigation, policies, frameworks, and regulations in quality assurance are, most of the time, portrayed as reflections of myths, that HEIs have to abide by under pressure (Bell & Scott, 2005). Accordingly, in this study, the Ethiopian higher education

proclamations (i.e., 351/2003 and 650/2009) and the HERQA's external quality regulatory frameworks, guidelines, and standards that govern and influence the operations of quality assurance in HEIs in the country are taken as frames of reference to make sense of the actual EQA practices in selected public and private universities.

External Stakeholders' Profile and Participation: To make effective the EQA process, there is a need to have a better awareness of the quality of higher education, and professional commitment towards the proper implementation of quality assurance procedures even among different external stakeholders in HEIs (Denison, 1996; Harvey & Green, 1993). In this way, external stakeholders' profile and participation can be considered as an important construct in the external environment (Rowley, 1996).

In this research, the concept of external stakeholders' profile and participation is supposed to refer to the knowledge (conceptions, positions, experiences, etc.) or trends (readiness, commitment, ownership, or capability) of persons or organizations as a whole (outside of the case study institutions) towards the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement or process and the actual engagement they have, to discharge their roles and responsibilities to run or facilitate the EQA system in selected universities. Here, therefore, the issue of the external stakeholders' profile and participation and the possible outcomes thereafter have been granted due attention, and thereby used to grasp the actual EQA practices in selected public and private universities in Ethiopia.

3.5.2. Internal Environment (University Characteristics)

It is the second component of the conceptual framework of the study. This dimension is conceptualized in the backdrop of the contingency theoretical perspective after considering the notions of the task or technical environment. The task or technical environment in this respect deals squarely with the immediate and specific context of an organization within which staff/workers perform and an organization operates (Betts, 2003; Gupta et al., 1994).

So, critical issues that differentiate, let's say one HEI from the other such as organizational complexity, institutional leadership and quality culture, profile and involvement of internal actors, etc. can be situated in the internal environment (Lenz & Engledow, 1986; Rowley, 1996). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this research study, some foremost constructs like institutional leadership and quality culture and internal actors' profile and participation have been treated under

the internal environment to apprehend the actual EQA practices in selected private and public universities in Ethiopia. Henceforward, the brief presentation is made on the above two imperative aspects under the umbrella of the internal environment.

Institutional Leadership and Quality Culture: Leadership establishes a structure and through which it influences the behavior of other persons in an organization by motivating, persuading, and directing towards attaining a common or shared purpose (Salter, 2002). Nguyen (2016) and Rediet (2014) have remarked that effective leadership, particularly in HEIs, with a necessary capability, needs to mobilizing staff members and deploying other essential resources to safeguard the quality and most importantly, to augment the quality-assuring activities. Leadership can have also a direct bearing on a culture of a given organization (or institution).

Organizational culture refers to traits and norms usually specific to a certain organization, which would likely influence the intra-organizational practices and inter-organizational relations (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; James, Brian, & Joseph, 2011; Loukkola & Zang, 2010). James, Brian, and Joseph further assert that as part and parcel of the overarching organizational culture, one can look into a quality culture in an institution that deals largely with a set of shared, accepted, and integrated patterns in which the process of quality enhancement and assurance is achieved. Also, Hobson et al. (2008) note that a quality culture goes more than adopting a set of rules and procedures, and it demands a persistent negotiation and agreement upon them and also on what quality is and how it ought to be upheld and sustained.

Consequently, Haileleul and Ayele (2011) have claimed that the success of quality assurance activities or practices is highly premised on the presence of strong leadership and solid quality culture in HEIs. Based on this fact, therefore in this study, the role of the senior leaders (presidents, vice presidents, and directors and heads of different administrative units) and the existing organizational trends and practices (or capacity, including the relevant resources and infrastructures) as part of quality culture in the institutions, in higher education EQA, and the possible repercussions afterward have been investigated thoroughly to uncover the actual EQA practices in selected public and private universities in Ethiopia.

Internal Actors' Profile and Participation: Academics (mostly teachers and researchers) are the main actors that can directly influence the attainment of the educational goals in HEIs (Mulu,

2012). With regard to the subject under study, Abeya (2014) and Rowley (1996) state that the effectiveness of a quality assurance system, be it internal or external, in HEIs depends, to a larger extent, on the knowledge, commitment, engagement, and ownership of the academics in the area.

Based on this reality, ‘internal actors’ profile and participation’ in this study are situated to deal with the overall knowledge (conceptions, views, positions, experiences, etc.) of the academic staff members (teachers and/or researchers) towards/in higher education EQA, the actual commitment they have, to discharge their roles and duties to reinforce it, and eventually the possible outcomes thereafter in case study institutions. Thus, in this connection, I have managed to explore the profile and participation of the internal actors just to unearth the real portraits of the EQA practices in selected public and private universities in Ethiopia.

3.5.3. The Actual EQA Practices

The actual EQA practices can be considered as the third and the last dimension of the conceptual framework of the study. Here, the real picture of the EQA practices in case study, degree-granting public and private universities, has been revealed mainly through in-depth, implicit, and/or explicit investigations that are carried out upon the core elements of the preceding two major dimensions (i.e., the principal constructs of internal and external environments) as they are depicted in the conceptual framework.

In accordance with this, focusing on the conceptions, views, positions, and experiences of the interview respondents and the participants of the focus group on one hand and the analysis and extraction of facts and descriptions from the relevant literature and documents on the other hand about the essence (meanings and motives or purposes) of the EQA system; its implementation practices (enactment of the external institutional quality audit and academic program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms and the non-university-specific and university-specific implementation challenges); and perceived outcomes, this study has managed to uncover the actual EQA practices in selected public and private universities in Ethiopia.

CHAPTER FOUR

Research Methodology

This chapter describes the design of the research with all its concomitant details. Accordingly, the chapter encompasses the philosophical worldviews or research paradigms i.e., the epistemological and the ontological considerations and the methodological perspectives. The methodological perspective includes the research method and design (respectively, dealing with the qualitative and the comparative case study approaches); the sampling method (considering the purposive sampling technique) and procedures; the data collection instruments (describing interview, FGD, and document review) and procedures; the data analysis approaches or strategies that are situated in the single-case and cross-case analyses; the criteria for trustworthiness; and at last, the ethical considerations.

4.1. Philosophical Worldviews/Research Paradigms

Creswell (2014) notes that although philosophical thinking, ideas, and thoughts remain largely obscured in research, they still impact the practice of research and need to be well-differentiated. In this respect, research philosophy typically refers to the primary view according to beliefs of the one who is undertaking research that assists in developing knowledge and its' nature (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Burrell & Morgan, 1979). For Creswell (2014), this philosophical stance of the research is discerned with various naming, notably worldviews, paradigms, epistemologies and ontologies, or research methodologies.

Hatch (2002), Lincoln and Guba (2005), and Seth (2014) indicate that the choice of paradigm is the first stage in the research process and the basis for other subsequent picks of research design, techniques for data collection, and tools for data analysis, which are adopted in the research. Similarly, as is put forward by Bryman and Bell (2015), the philosophical orientation of an individual researcher (as a research paradigm) is critical to offer clearness of study and also assists him/her to identify appropriate research design that will harvest the needed outcome. Therefore, research philosophy provides a fundamental blueprint to the researcher's judgment regarding the merit of value in the research, the essence of reality, and the processes of gaining what create acceptable knowledge in the field (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 2005).

Generally, as to Creswell, Goodchild, and Turner (1996), Hatch (2002), and Lincoln and Guba (2005), for the sake of simplicity, one can think of or understand research paradigm or philosophy in the following three ways: epistemology, which refers to common parameters that are linked with the excellent way to explore nature of the real world (or the perceived relationship with the object being studied, which is considered real); ontology, which deals with common tenets that are created to comprehend the real nature of the society (or the set of beliefs relates to the existence and nature of reality); and methodology, which refers to the combination of different approaches and techniques that are used by the researcher to make investigations on various situations (or the process and means of knowing or understanding something is considered real). In view of that, epistemology, ontology, and methodology as core components of a research paradigm, their brief explanations and specific manipulations in this research study are described as follows.

4.1.1. Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

The term epistemology originally comes from the combination of two different Greek words: ‘episteme’, meaning knowledge, and ‘logos’, meaning theory (Grbich, 2007). Beyond its terminology-related delineation, an epistemological issue concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a certain field or discipline and how it can be acquired (Ary et al., 2010; Bryman, 2001; Hatch, 2002). In the realm of research, particularly the focus of epistemology used to be on the nexus between the researcher/investigator (knower) and the researched matter (the would-be known) about which empirical data are generated (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Hence, it is a known fact that a researcher’s epistemological standpoint frames his or her interaction with what is being researched or investigated (Guba, 1990).

According to Bryman (2001), positivism and interpretivism are two of many contrasting epistemologies that advocate different methods in the study of social reality. Of these, my epistemological position here is declared as more of an interpretivist or interpretivism, meaning that, somewhat in stark contrast to the adoption of a natural, scientific model in quantitative research, the emphasis is mainly placed on the understanding of the social world through an in-depth exploration of the interpretation of that world by its participants (see Bryman, 2008, 2012; Hatch, 2002). Furthermore, the interpretive approach considers the systematic analysis of socially meaningful multiple, varied, and complex actions via the direct (detailed and exhaustive) observation of and/or communications with people in natural settings to arrive at understandings

and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Creswell, 2007; D'Ortenzio, 2012).

While the questions of ontology are mostly concerned with the nature of social entities or the beliefs about the notion or nature of the social world and what can be investigated or known about it (Ary et al., 2010; Bryman, 2012; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hatch, 2002). In this regard, my ontological position is also avowed as more of a constructionist/constructivist or constructivism, which is in harmony with an interpretivist epistemology; and it implies that social properties are upshots of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena 'out there' and separate from those who are engaged in its construction (see Bryman, 2001, 2012). Even for Merriam (2009), constructivism as an extension of the interpretivist approach, centers on multiple perspectives, and the underlying supposition thereof is that reality is socially constructed meaning that, there is no single, observable reality, but rather there are multiple and diverse realities or interpretations of a single event. As a result, researchers do not try to look for knowledge; instead, they need to construct it (Merriam, 2009).

Indeed, constructivism is often combined with interpretivism and in such a manner, the key ideas or principles that are situated in them can be synthesized as making subjective meanings of individual's experiences, constructing diverse and multiple meanings, and making meanings by interaction with others (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2008). Thus, in my study, I have attempted to understand the actual practices of Ethiopian higher education EQA in the contexts of selected public and private universities mainly from the vantage point of the informants. At this level, the subjective and multiple meanings are interpreted/constructed through continuous interactions with the research informants/participants taking into account the institutional and technical environments in the respective selected institutions.

Overall, my epistemological and ontological positions are predominantly stemmed from the fact that I have perceived and understood quality assurance schemes basically as social constructions that depended on certain social values and in turn liable to be affected by a variety of factors (i.e., perhaps external and internal environmental constructs)⁵ within a given context. In this sense, it is necessary to grasp how different stakeholders and actors inside and outside of each selected

⁵ See Chapter Three.

university make their own meanings and thoughts regarding the existing EQA arrangement, its implementation practices, and (perceived) outcomes. To achieve this end, I strongly believe that numbers would not lead me to the nethermost informants' emotions and temperaments and help to understand their intrinsic or covert feelings, motives, and thoughts behind their actions, than words. This makes the aforesaid epistemological and ontological positions of mine quite appropriate to explore the conceptions, views, positions, and experiences of the informants focusing on the subject here is under investigation.

4.1.2. Methodological Perspectives

As to Lincoln and Guba (2005), methodology refers to how an investigator approaches his or her empirical investigation in search of the phenomena. Lincoln and Guba further enunciate that the methodological issue relates more to the strategic approach rather than the specific methods, techniques, and procedures that are employed for data collection and analysis. In this respect, methodologically, one can make use of the quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approach in carrying out the research (Creswell, 2014). Of these, notably the qualitative and quantitative research approaches have a bit distinctly different epistemologies and different forms of representations in research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

For instance, quantitative methods inherently derive from an objectivist epistemology, which posits reality as single, objective, and universal that can be observed, known, and measured, while qualitative methods upkeep the idea that there are multiple realities, that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction, perception, and discernment (Fairbrother, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1998). As Creswell (2014) further expands the issue, often the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is framed in terms of using words (qualitative) rather than numbers (quantitative), or using close-ended questions (quantitative hypotheses) rather than open-ended questions (qualitative interview questions).

However, for Newman and Benz (as cited in Creswell, 2014), qualitative and quantitative research approaches still should not always be viewed as rigid, distinct categories, polar opposites, or dichotomies; instead, they represent different ends along a single continuum. Also, one can find mixed-methods research, which resides in the middle of this continuum; because it does

incorporate essential elements of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches (see Creswell, 2007).

Especially, of the two popular research approaches (i.e., quantitative and qualitative), most social and educational inquirers recently have been turned into qualitative methods because of their potential immense advantages to better comprehend the social world and the dissatisfaction with quantitative approaches, which often tend to lessen the complexity and diversity of human experiences (Bryman, 2012; Darojat, 2013). In this study as well, I am well-convinced to employ the qualitative-case study research approach, to get a deeper understanding of the actual EQA practices in selected degree-granting public and private universities in Ethiopia (see the details of the qualitative research method and the comparative case study design in the subsequent parts).

4.2. Research Method and Design

Under this part, brief descriptions of the qualitative research method and the comparative case study design are forwarded. In this study, the qualitative research method is employed as an overall umbrella, to prompt, elicit, and interpret the subject under investigation. While the comparative case study design is used in the study to systematically extract and deal with the similarities and differences in connection with the topic here is under study, between selected public and private universities.

4.2.1. Qualitative Approach: As a Research Method

A qualitative research method is typically a multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive and naturalistic approach to its subject matter; and it enables the investigator to interact with the research participants and understand the social world from their standpoints and interpret them correctly (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2011). According to Hatch (2002), in qualitative approaches, usually, the researcher enters the research site with no blatant expectations or interests in controlling constructs, herein there is no hypothesis to be offered or tested. Furthermore, the qualitative approach is primarily inductive, that is, pulling detailed portions of information from one or a few cases to dye an overall picture of a certain phenomenon or context (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1998). In this case, it is emergent and flexible and also responsive to changing

conditions of the investigation in progress (Creswell, 2012; Fairbrother, 2014; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1998).

In qualitative research, an investigator: develops a complex and holistic picture, analyses words, reports meticulous outlooks of informants/participants, and on the whole, conducts the study in a natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Yin, 2011). In this respect, qualitative research is used to explore and understand a central phenomenon in its real situation; and the research questions are a bit broad and general and seek to understand participants' experiences with it (Creswell, 2007; Newby, 2010).

In the case of this research study, because it is principally geared to gain a deeper understanding of the informants' conceptions, views, perspectives, and experiences via relying on querying wide-ranging and somewhat general questions, collecting relevant data consisting of mainly verbal explanations, and unfolding and analyzing the data (i.e., words, narrations, illustrations, etc.) inductively in regard to the actual practices of Ethiopian higher education EQA, the overarching qualitative research method is found to be most appropriate.

4.2.2. Comparative Case Study: As a Research Design

A case study is fundamentally an empirical inquiry that explores a contemporary phenomenon deeply and within its real-life milieu through detailed data investigation involving multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006; Yin, 2009). For Patton (1987), case studies become particularly useful, where one needs to comprehend some specific problem or situation critically and where one can pinpoint cases, rich in information. Likewise, Merriam (1998), Stake (2006), and Yin (2003) remark that a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the circumstance and meaning for those involved. In this respect, the concern in case study research is in context rather than dealing with a specific variable and in discovery rather than mere confirmation (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003). As a result, in any case study, there is the anticipation of generating thick descriptions, drawing experiential understanding, and exploring multiple realities (Merriam, 1998, 2009).

According to Stake (1995), there are about three different kinds of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective or comparative case studies. The intrinsic case study is the classic and single-case design, where the researcher's primary interest is to understand a specific case owing

to its particularity and ordinariness. While in the case of instrumental case study, the researcher's pivotal concern and interest are in comprehending something more general than the specificities in a particular case. In the collective or comparative case study, the researcher presumes that he or she can obtain greater insight into a research topic after simultaneously studying multiple cases in a single research project. Based on this and other distinctions of case studies, Darajat (2013) unequivocally notes that "recognizing the different perspectives of the types of case studies, it is fair enough to say that making a clear-cut demarcation of the case study types in a given study is a very challenging issue" (p. 70). However, throughout this research study, principally the notions of a comparative case study design have been utilized.

A comparative case study is usually referred to as a collective case study; cross-case, multi-case, or multi-site study; or multiple case study (Maniku, 2008; Merriam, 1998), which focuses on a particular issue within more than one case (Yin, 2009). The purpose of a comparative case study research is to better understand the differences and similarities between specific cases, and for the researcher, to be able to analyze the data both within each situation and across situations (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Stake, 1995, 2005, 2006). Therefore, in this study, since my entire focus is to make within-case analysis and cross-comparison of contexts to reveal the actual EQA practices in the degree-granting, case study public and private universities in Ethiopia, the comparative case study design is deemed so imperative. In this way, selected public and private universities have been treated as comparable cases and compared against the themes such as the essence, implementation practices, and perceived outcomes of the EQA system.

With respect to the role of the investigator in case studies, Yin (2009) unveils that the basic proficiencies that are required for a case study include the ability to: ask proper questions and adequately interpret the answers; be an attentive listener; be adaptive, flexible, and responsive; have a firm grasp of the subjects being studied; and be unbiased by preconceived notions and opinions. Raddon (2010) also relates a case study researcher's work with the role of detectives. In this sense, a case study researcher's role may position the investigator at different posts over different phases, and this may have a repercussion of a different kind on the outcome of the study (Chen, 2012). Accordingly, my role in this comparative case study has been multidimensional i.e., as initiator or designer of the study, as moderator or administrator of the research process, and as analyzer and interpreter of the findings in the study.

4.3. Sampling Method and Procedures

In this part, a brief description is made about specific topics such as purposive sampling technique, selection of cases or study sites, and selection of informants and documents.

4.3.1. Purposive Sampling Technique

Sampling is the process of picking units from a population of interest so that by studying the units, one may find results intended to get from the target population (Bryman, 2008; Tetteh, 2014). Sampling in research is quite important; because time, resources, and other research restraints make it problematic if not impossible to conduct research based on the whole population (Ary et al., 2010; Paintsil, 2016). In general, sampling could either be probabilistic, which is usually aligned to quantitative research, or non-probability, that is, mostly affiliated with qualitative research (Bryman, 2012).

Probability sampling is the most rigorous form of sampling strategy in quantitative research, which depends on the selection of a random and representative sample to allow generalizations in research (Ary et al., 2010; Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998). Some examples of probability sampling methods are: simple random sampling method, stratified random sampling method, and cluster random sampling method (Tetteh, 2014). Nevertheless, the non-probability sampling strategy allows the investigator to opt for relevant and information-rich samples in a purposeful manner i.e., in a deliberate way, with some purpose or focus in mind (Merriam, 2009; Tetteh, 2014). In this regard, some important examples of non-probability sampling methods are: purposive sampling method, convenience sampling method, and snowball sampling method (Ary et al., 2010; Tetteh, 2014). Of these sampling techniques, in consonant with the basic features of the qualitative research method and the comparative case study design that are embedded in the study, the purposive sampling method is found to be appropriate in this research project.

Purposive sampling is defined as a process whereby the researcher may opt for those who: know the information required, are willing to reflect on the phenomena of interest, and have the time and courage to participate in the research process (Richards & Morse, 2007). Patton (2002) indicates that purposeful sampling aims to select information-rich cases or informants, whose study will shed light on the subject that is under investigation. In the same way, Bryman (2008) expounds that the goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases or participants strategically so that those

sampled are relevant to the research questions that are raised in the study. Accordingly, in this study, the study sites/cases and the participants/informants (and the relevant documents for review) are selected with the help of purposeful sampling, using some selection criteria (see the details in the succeeding parts i.e., selection of cases/study sites and selection of informants and documents).

Furthermore, based on the inherent features of the qualitative case study approach, a researcher does not need to have many cases and informants to study about. In favor of this, for instance, Creswell (2012) enunciates that the ability of the investigator to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site. Equipped with this understanding, concerning the sample size, Yin (2009) contends that having typical criteria or formula that is used to determine sample size is irrelevant in the sphere of a case study. Nevertheless, the exact purposive sample sizes are decided on the basis of theoretical saturation i.e., the point in data collection, when new data no longer bring additional extra insights to the research questions (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005) or saturation, meaning the point at which no new ideas are conveyed by study participants (Hall, 2015). In view of that, I am purposely limited to choose few cases and participants/informants in this study. In fact, the exact sample size in the study has been determined based upon the underlying principles of theoretical/saturation.

4.3.2. Selection of Cases/Study Sites

Punch and Oancea (2014) explicate that sampling decisions are demanded not only about which people to interview or which events to observe, but also about settings and processes. Therefore, such case selection is quite central to qualitative research in the sense that, unlike quantitative research, which usually uses many cases, qualitative research, uses relatively few to obtain detailed and substantial data (Patton, 1987, 2015). Particularly carrying out a comparative case study investigation greatly presupposes choosing two or more comparable or contrasting cases such as nations, organizations, or communities (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). According to Bryman (2012), social phenomena are better understood if compared in the light of two or more contrasting cases.

To this end, the purposive rather than random selection of case study universities is carried out in this research study primarily based upon the diverse (assorted) nature of the institutions

themselves. Meaning that the comparison is made between selected universities in Ethiopia, from the two widely known and even sometimes antagonistic higher education sectors –public and private. So namely, the Dilla University (DU) and the Saint Mary’s University (SMU), respectively as public and private case study universities, constituted the sample and treated as comparable cases in the study. In this respect, comparing these two varied cases has made the comparison easy and interesting. Also, it has brought about rich information on the widest possible range of factors or issues that influence or impinge on the actual EQA practices within the contexts of the Ethiopian higher education system and individually with respect to the milieus of each case university.

Apart from their differences, the two degree-granting, case study public and private universities are selected because of some of their commonalities as well. In this regard, for instance, both of them are: externally quality audited universities by the HERQA, currently accommodating more than twenty-five thousand students in various educational programs and packages via different modes of delivery, established as HEIs as of the 1990s, and now functioning as full-fledged universities in the country. Additionally, my familiarity and acquaintance with case study universities (it is essentially in favor of an insider’s or ‘emic’ perspective in qualitative research) has led me purposely to choose them and study deeply about the subject in the institutions.

4.3.3. Selection of Informants and Documents

Next to making decisions on the selection of the study sites or cases, choosing the informants/participants and the relevant documents to be reviewed became an important phase to accomplish in this research study. Hence, as informants of the study, the concerned official from the MoSHE; the HERQA directors and experts; and selected universities’ presidents and/or vice presidents, quality improvement/assurance directors and quality experts, college or institute deans/heads, and senior academic staff members (including teachers and/or researchers) are involved in the research process (see Table 4.1, below).

Table 4.1 Selected Informants in the Study

Positions/Ranks	Name of the Institutions/Organizations and the Respective Number of Informants				Total
	MoSHE	HERQA	DU	SMU	
Senior Official	1	-	-	-	1
Director-General and Deputy Director-General	-	2	-	-	2
Quality Audit and Enhancement Directorate Director/Expert and Accreditation, Equivalence, and Authentication of Educational Credentials Directorate Director/Expert	-	2	-	-	2
Presidents and/or Vice Presidents	-	-	2	3	5
Quality Improvement/Assurance Directors and Quality Experts	-	-	3	2	5
College or Institute Deans/Heads	-	-	2	2	4
Senior Academic Staff (teachers and/or researchers)	-	-	5	5	10
Total	1	4	12	12	29

The informants/participants of the study were intentionally selected based on their knowledge and experiences as well as their pertinent responsibilities in relation to the subject that was under investigation. In this way, the involvement of the informants has greatly helped to amass in-depth data emphasizing the subject of the study. Likewise, the relevant documents reviewed were deliberately selected in the study. Accordingly, some of the documents were chosen based on whether their content is related to the overall areas of the higher education EQA system in the country or not (these were mostly nation-wide documents). The rest of the documents were selected on the basis of their closeness towards the external/quality assurance practices, which particularly take place in each of the case study universities (these are mainly institutional documents). In both cases, the authenticity of the documents has been taken into serious consideration.

4.4. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Qualitative research method and case study design are often accompanying the collection and analysis of written or spoken texts or the direct observation of behaviors in a natural setting

(Bryman, 2012). To this end, indeed, the qualitative method and the case study approach usually instigate the investigator to make good use of, for instance, multiple methods of data collection to generate information, and thereby to be able to adequately answer the basic research questions, which are framed in a given research study. The information in such a manner is gleaned from several sources such as personal interviews, group discussions, observations, documentation, archival records, physical artifacts, and other similar ways (Yin, 2011, 2012).

Similarly, in this comparative case study, I have managed to use multiple data gathering techniques or strategies like semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and document reviews for engendering adequate information from various sources of evidence. In all cases, in this study, the data collection process has been continued until the level of data saturation, whereby the collection of more data through selected methods appears to have no new or relevant information to the study (see Krueger & Casey, 2000). Henceforth, the descriptions of the data gathering instruments and the respective procedures in the study are succinctly forwarded.

4.4.1. Interviews

An interview is a prominent data collection tool in qualitative research. For many researchers (e.g., Punch & Oancea, 2014; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009), an interview is considered as the most powerful way of exploring and understanding an individual's insights, meanings, characterizations of situations, and constructions of reality. The case study researcher's task is then to use this information to reveal multiple views of the case (Yin, 2009). Moreover, it is a known fact that especially the semi-structured interview technique supports the qualitative approach (Grbich, 2007; Hatch, 2002) as it opens up the room, interviewed subjects' viewpoints to be uttered in a relatively openly designed interview situation compared to a structured interview (Darojat, 2013). As a result, in this study, particularly a semi-structured interviewing technique is employed as the main data gathering instrument, to elicit relevant information about the conceptions, views, perspectives, and experiences of the respondents regarding the actual practices of higher education EQA in case study public and private universities in Ethiopia.

In the study, the sample frame for interviews consists of the respondents from the MoSHE, the HERQA, and the two case study universities (see Appendix B). The respondents were interviewed using the already prepared interview guides, having enough flexibility in the course of the

interview process. The interview guides were grouped into five, that was, premeditated for the senior official at the MoSHE; the HERQA's director-general and deputy director-general; the quality audit and enhancement directorate director/quality audit senior expert of the HERQA; the HERQA's accreditation, equivalence, and authentication of educational credentials directorate director/accreditation senior expert; and selected public and private universities' presidents and/or vice presidents, quality improvement/assurance directors and quality experts, and deans/heads of different colleges or institutes (see Appendix C, 1 up to 5). Content-wise, the interview guides are slightly different for each group of respondents in accordance with their duties and responsibilities in their respective organizations or institutions.

To carry out interviews, the time and place, which accommodate each interview respondent, were arranged based on the will and full consent of the interviewees themselves. In all cases, the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner; and each interview session has taken about forty to sixty minutes. Amidst the interview sessions, all the necessary notes or memos were taken. At the end of each interview, I have tried to summarize what has been said and, then asked the interviewee if the summary exactly reflects his/her views, opinions, or positions. Usually, the notes or memos are transcribed or partly analyzed immediately after the end of each interview session. By so doing, I have got a great deal of information on every subject that the respondents are asked to reflect on.

4.4.2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The qualitative case study research also utilizes the focus group as a data-gathering tool. A focus group involves a group of people for conducting an interview, at the same time and with a well-defined time constraint, often under the leadership or guidance of a moderator (Berg, 2001; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Picciano, 2004). Also, Krueger and Casey (2000) mark out a focus group as a small group of people (perhaps who share common notions and characteristics), and they are selected and assembled for research purposes to involve in an organized discussion about a certain issue of which they have good personal experiences.

As a data-gathering strategy, the focus group has a number of advantages. According to Thomas and Nelson (as cited in Paul, 2012), it is a quick and efficient data collection approach, because

the investigator can gather detailed information from many people in a single session within a short period, even at a lower cost than if individuals are interviewed separately.

As to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), the criterion for picking focus group members ought to be homogeneity, not diversity. This is primarily because group interviews of people with similar backgrounds prompt active interaction that enables the collection of information-rich responses and a variety of perspectives on the subject of the study (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, in this study, different FGD sessions were arranged with intentionally selected senior academic staff members (teachers and/or researchers) from each case study university (see Appendix B). The participants in the FGDs were grouped into two. The first group was a composition of teachers and some research staff from the public university, while the second group was formed only by teachers from the privately-owned university⁶. To step up the chance for all group members to contribute more, each group size is limited to have five members (see Patton, 2002).

The discussions were then held⁷ based upon the FGD guiding questions (see Appendix D, 1 and 2); and I have coordinated and moderated the meetings. In the discussions, the data are collected in the form of notes and short memos. The notes and memos were produced mainly emphasizing unique individual standpoints and collective views of the entire group. In the end, to manage the risks of incompleteness and misunderstandings, I have attempted to present the summarized points to the discussants before the end of the discussions, and after that I took the necessary corrections (see Mbabazi, 2013). In such a manner, therefore, the ultimate data are secured, and immediately after that the transcriptions and the rest of the analysis processes were followed (as has been done for the case of the interview data).

4.4.3. Document Reviews

In this study, I have also employed document review as the other important data generating tool. According to Gribbs (2002), documents broadly include any paper or archive especially the official ones, which offer more or less direct evidence of decisions, transactions, status, thoughts, debates, or actions focusing on different phenomena. The strengths of documentation as a source

⁶ This is because I have not got/accessed the relevant research staff (for this study) in the case institution.

⁷ The FGDs with each group have taken place at different dates and venues; and each session stayed approximately for two hours.

of data lie in its stability, unobtrusiveness or inconspicuousness, exactness, and wide-ranging coverage (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Moreover, for Stake (1995), documents quite often serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not be able to directly observe and experience. Based on this fact, in this research study, document review as a data-gathering tool, was primarily used to explore or understand the discrepancy and conformity between the national EQA framework/arrangement and its actual practices, particularly in case study public and private universities in Ethiopia.

To achieve this end, various national and institutional documentations such as the national higher education proclamations (i.e., 351/2003 and 650/2009), the external quality audit examiners' manuals, the criteria or standards for academic program accreditation and re-accreditation, the institutional self-assessment reports, and the external institutional quality audit reports have been reviewed and analyzed to complement, corroborate, and augment the evidences or findings that are drawn from the in-depth interviews and the FGDs in the study (see the list/descriptions of some of the documents that are reviewed in this study in 'Appendix V, B').

4.5. Data Analysis Strategies

Data analysis is conceived as working with information, arranging and organizing it, breaking it into manageable units or pieces, synthesizing it, searching for possible patterns or themes, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and finally, deciding what the investigator wants to tell others or report (Kadhila, 2012). More specifically, in the case of the data analysis in the qualitative research method, Bryman (2012) pronounces that qualitative research differs from quantitative research in its use of non-statistical methods of analysis and reporting data. Furthermore, the qualitative method mostly employs an inductive way of analysis via categorization and interpretation of data in terms of common themes to serve as the overall portrait of the case (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Likewise, case study research also entails a similar data analysis strategy that enables the case to be well illuminated and understood through an extensive and in-depth depiction and interpretation of the phenomenon. To this effect, in this comparative case study, I have used a thematic analysis technique, which provides a rich and detailed description of the subject in the study (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this way, the data analysis has taken place emphasizing the major themes and

sub-themes that were congregated from the data vis-à-vis the conceptual framework and the basic research questions of the study. Overall, anchored in the fundamental principles of thematic analysis, the data that were generated by the semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and document reviews were transcribed (organized, rewritten, and/or translated from the Amharic into English language), coded (categorized, reviewed, and ascertained/distinguished analytical themes and sub-themes), and interpreted (see Anderson, 1998; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003).

In such a manner, the data analysis in this comparative case study was carried out into two major consecutive phases i.e., within-case analysis and between-case analyses (see Merriam, 2009). In this light, firstly, the data were analyzed individually, case by case to get an understanding of the conceptual, institutional, and technical issues in operation there. Then secondly, a cross-case analysis was put into effect by juxtaposing the main themes emerging from the analysis of each case or through equating instances of those comparable cases. In addition to the aforementioned two pivotal stages of analyses, finally, I have synthesized the major patterns and themes and reflected on: their place or role in the global literature, their connections to those manipulated theories in the study, and their practical or possible implications in connection with the subject that is under investigation (see Anderson, 1998; Stake, 1995, 2006).

In general, in this study, the analyses at different phases were put forward mostly with the help of multiple long and short direct quotations or verbatim quotes, narrative statements, and excerpts of relevant documents. For Denzin and Lincoln (2005), multiple quotes are used as evidence of manifold realities and the manifestation of different perspectives in qualitative/case study research. Eventually, like as it holds true for any other qualitative-based researches, herein, the data collection, the data analysis, and the write-up of findings have proceeded hand-in-hand or occurred concurrently (see Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002).

4.6. Criteria for Trustworthiness

Because generalizability and reliability become difficult issues in qualitative research, tantamount to this, for validation, in such a research approach the concept trustworthiness can be coined (Bryman, 2008). Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research generally requires addressing four different criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lodico et al., 2006). In connection with these four

major criteria, there are also several specific and interrelated strategies, which can be used directly to enhance or ensure the trustworthiness of a given research project. Some of them are: prolonged engagement at the research site/s, triangulation, member checks, thick description about the research process and the individual cases, reflective journaling, and peer debriefing (Lincoln, 1995; Merriam, 2009).

Among these strategies, notably the triangulation, peer review, member checking, and thick/rich description techniques were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Regarding triangulation, Bowen (2005) enunciates that it is a strategy of substantiation, which helps the researcher to be more confident of his/her study findings and conclusions. Concerning this, when it comes to this research study, first of all, I have gathered enormous data from various sources using multiple methods of data collection instruments. After that, to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the collected data from several sources through the interviews, FGDs, and document reviews were presented, analyzed, and interpreted in a way to be corroborated and compensated each other. In this way, in this study attempts were to meet the requirements of the triangulation strategy.

The trustworthiness in this study was also guaranteed through exposing the paper to the commentaries of different people (i.e., peer review). In this regard, the salient contributors are both my internal and external supervisors, who critically monitored, commented, and evaluated the paper from its very onset up to the end. The paper was also-reviewed and commented at different times, by one of my friends, who had adequate experience in the area of qualitative research inquiry and comparative case study approach. Besides, I have carried out different informal peer debriefing sessions with some other qualified colleagues of mine, concerning the progress of the paper. Apart from these, the paper at its different stages, has been publically presented in different seminars and workshops, which are arranged by the CCEPS/AAU –in Ethiopia, and the Gothenburg University and the University of Borås –in Sweden and commented by wider audiences. Then, on the whole, the comments and suggestions that were offered in all these opportunities have been taken very seriously and in turn contributed greatly to upgrade the quality of the paper.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking also matters in ensuring trustworthiness, in sharing either the summary of results or the whole research findings for the

informants before the official completion of the study. In this respect, in this study, a compilation of short summaries of the research findings have been sent to some of the interviewees and focus group discussants for comments, and then the necessary corrections have been made on the paper. In actual fact, this has augmented the level of the truthfulness of the research findings in the study.

For the sake of boosting the trustworthiness of this study, I have also offered detailed accounts of: the domestic and international milieus in connection with the subject of the study; the backdrops of case study public and private universities; the conceptions, views, and perspectives of the informants in line with the subject that is under investigation; and the entire research undertaking processes and procedures of the study, at different spots and levels. This might possibly led the major findings of this research to be simple to understand to the readers and to have a better level of acceptance in other similar contexts. Furthermore, I have looked into the key findings of several researchers in the area and utilized some of them to substantiate and strengthen my interpretations in the study. In this way, I have endeavored to beef up the level of the authenticity of the study.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

Since educational and social science research mostly delves deep into the social and personal lives and careers of human beings, the ethical issues are taken there into serious consideration to protecting from harm individuals and groups, who take part in the research process (Berg, 2001). Similarly, Bryman (2012) and Punch and Oancea (2014) remark that in the course of carrying out such research, the research informants' privacy, well-being, dignity, and freedom need to be properly safeguarded. To guarantee this, in this study, proper ethical guidelines and protocols are prepared and strictly pursued throughout the research process.

In this light, first of all, I have attempted to develop an appropriate informed consent form for the informants to ensure their rights to be protected during the entire research process (see Appendix A). Then, prior to the actual involvement of the informants to provide information to me, regarding the subject of the study, they have been given sufficient clarification about the overall intentions and other related issues of the research project with an emphasis on how crucial their unpretentious and genuine responses or answers would be to the investigation. Eventually, those informants, who have fully agreed to participate and ratified their participation by putting their own signatures on the informed consent form, are chosen as eligible informants in the study.

Concerning the issue of confidentiality or anonymity, especially in the case of direct quotations, the informants were addressed in the study by using different anonymous codes, which do not have explicit and direct associations to their real personal identities or names (see Appendix B). Nevertheless, sometimes, it is impossible to completely hideout the identifiable information about some of the informants owing to the specific posts or positions they have held in different organizations or institutions. In this case, I have tried to candidly discuss with those informants on the matter and ultimately, come to an agreement.

Moreover, in this research study, as a researcher, my code of ethics has been based upon integrity, when I: crafted the instruments; presented, analyzed, and interpret the data; and lastly, drew the conclusions and implications (see Yin, 2011). Consequently, in writing the whole research report, I have managed to minimize any biased language against persons or groups because of religion, ethnic group, political ideology, gender, disability, age, etc. Above all, through the aforesaid key strategies and others, it is my firm belief that I have been created an environment in which the informants could openly and freely express their opinions, views, and positions in relation to the subject of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

Higher Education and Quality Assurance: The Ethiopian Context

In this chapter, I have endeavored to portray higher education and quality assurance in Ethiopia. In connection to this, topics such as a brief description of Ethiopia, a short history of the Ethiopian higher education system, quality assurance systems in Ethiopian higher education, and at last, EQA in Ethiopian higher education were succinctly presented with the intent to highlight the national context, and at the same time, to be served as a suitable introduction to get in the upcoming within-case and cross-case analyses.

5.1. A Brief Description of Ethiopia

The country is officially named –the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). At present, Ethiopia has constituted ten federal states and two city administrations. The regional federal states are: Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNPR), Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Harari, and Sidama⁸. The remaining two city governments/states, which have their own self-administration are Addis Ababa (the capital city) and Dire Dawa (Wondwosen, 2008) (see Figure 5.1, below).

Geographically, Ethiopia is positioned in the north-eastern part of the continent of Africa, which is prevalently known as the ‘Horn of Africa’, with a total area of 1,127,127 square kilometers (Central Statistical Agency [CSA], 2006). Ethiopia is bordered by countries like Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, South Sudan, and (North) Sudan. Ethiopia is landlocked, and the second-most populous country in Africa, after Nigeria. Based on the most recent United Nations projections, the country had approximately close to 110.14 million inhabitants by 2019. This population number makes Ethiopia the fourteenth most populous country in the world (World Population Review [WPR], 2019).

⁸ As a newly, 10th regional state, ‘Sidama’ got the status on the 18th of June 2020.

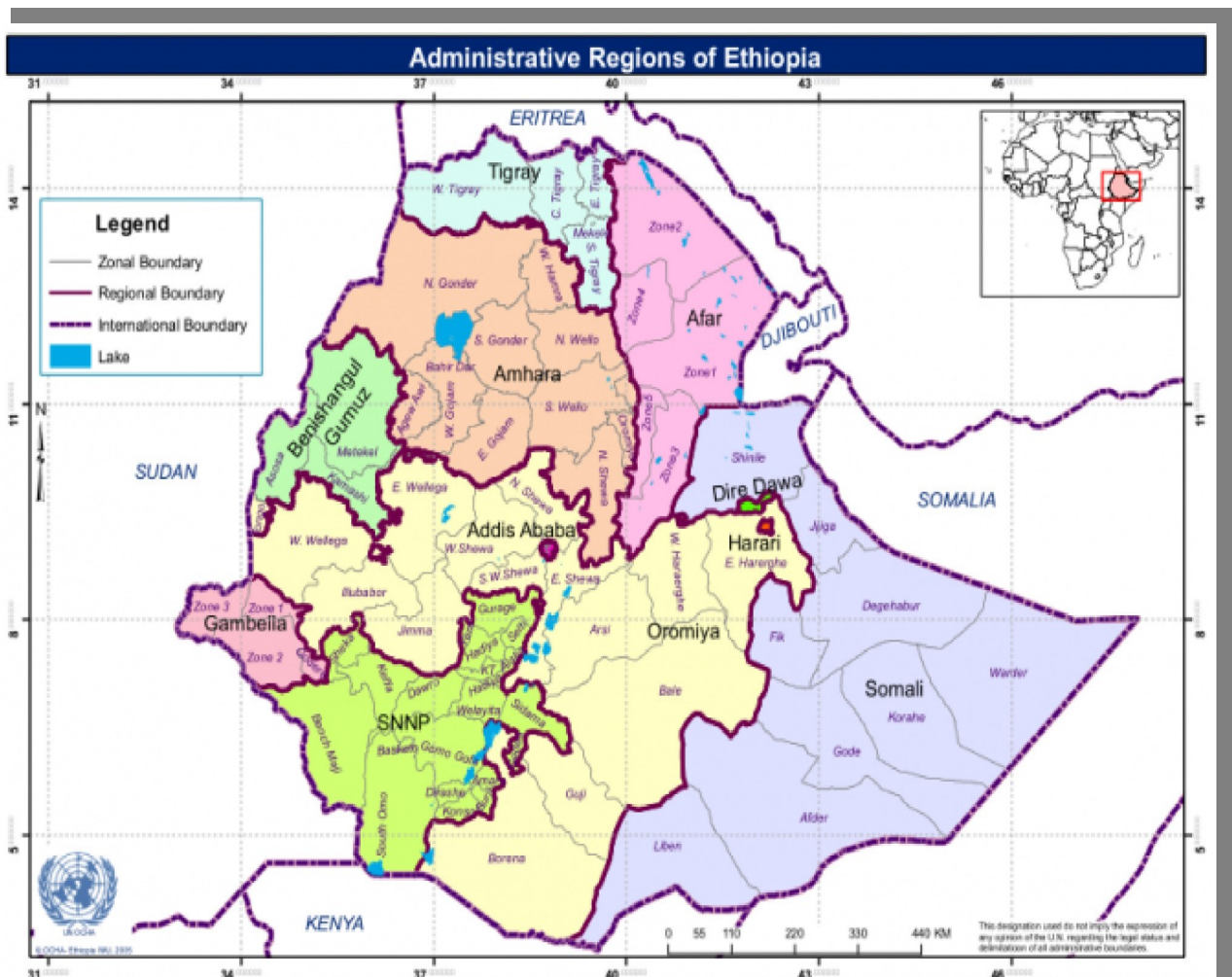


Figure 5.1 Current Administrative Map of Ethiopia

Source: UNOCHA (Ramachandran, 2017)

Ethiopia has the cradle of human civilizations and more than 3000 years of state history; and it has also its own unique writing systems and alphabets (CSA, 2006). The country is also well-known in its long history of independence; and in that regard, it is one of the only two countries in Africa, which have not yet been experienced classic colonization. Furthermore, Ethiopia has a significant place as a donor and diplomatic capital of the continent of Africa (CSA, 2006; Store Norske Leksikon [SNL] as cited in Hertaas, 2011). Economically, however, Ethiopia is labeled as one of the poorest countries in the world. The country is preponderantly characterized by a rural economy, which is often vulnerable to several natural and weather calamities (Girmaw, 2014; Ministry of Finance and Economic Development [MOFED], 2008).

In the case of the education business, the education system in Ethiopia is arranged as pre-primary, lower primary, upper primary, lower secondary, upper secondary or preparatory, TVET, and higher education (Abeya, 2014) (see Appendix F, 1). Nevertheless, operationally, based on the current federal arrangement of government that is in place in Ethiopia, education is becoming a shared responsibility among the federal government, regional states, and district or local administrations (FDRE, 2010). For instance, the MoE usually offers technical, policy, and other supports to the regional states, and the newly established MoSHE⁹ on its part, directs and assists universities and other education sectors, notably TVET. The regional states and district or local administrations have also the mandate to monitor and operate formal and non-formal educational programs at different levels (FDRE, 2010; Ministry of Science and Higher Education [MoSHE], 2019).

5.2. A Short History of the Ethiopian Higher Education System

Education is not to be exactly new to Ethiopia that is, home to an aged long civilization (Seyoum, 2005). Although the presence of inscriptions before the coming of Christianity into the country had shown the antecedence of literacy over Christianity, Ethiopia's traditional didactic system is deeply rooted in its Orthodox Church, which possessed more than 1,700 years of tradition of elitist education (Behailu, 2011; Saint, 2004; WB, 2003). Similarly, Seyoum (2005) confirms that Qur'anic education has also been given by Islamic learning institutions in Ethiopia, notably among communities reside in the western and eastern parts of the country starting from the seventh century. In this respect, it has immensely contributed to the invigoration of Ethiopian traditional education.

Despite the country's olden times educational heritages, in Ethiopia, modern secular education had only been initiated at the turn of the twentieth century (Saint, 2004; WB, 2003) with the opening of Emperor Menelik II School at the capital of Addis Ababa, in October 1908. Nonetheless, for Tesfaye Semela (2011), modern higher education, which is Western-oriented in its nature had instigated in 1950 with the establishment of the UCoAA having the faculties of Sciences and Arts. Initially, the UCoAA had had less than 1,000 students and about fifty teachers. Indeed, at that

⁹ The MoSHE was officially established in October 2018, by the proclamation number 1097/2018. The Ministry is responsible to lead or direct the development of science, higher education, and the TVET in Ethiopia (MoSHE, 2019).

time, the core teaching faculties were expatriate staff mostly from the USA and Canada (Abeje, 2014; Habtamu, 2003). In 1962, the UCoAA had upgraded and renamed 'Haile Selassie I University', after the then emperor of Ethiopia (Abeje, 2014). The Haile Selassie I University then continued launching more institutions, faculties, and colleges (Abeya, 2014; World Bank, 2003). However, generally speaking, there were only meager improvements that registered in the higher education sector during Emperor Haile Selassie's I regime, from 1930 to 1974 (Melese, 2015).

In 1974, the later United Soviet Socialist Republic-backed military i.e., the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) or 'Derg' (which means committee), under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam and his comrades had taken over the power from Emperor Haile Selassie I and his cabinets and ruled the country with the facades of a Marxist ideology until the year 1991 (Melese, 2015; Saint, 2004). Following the downfall of the Imperial regime in 1974, the Haile Selassie I University had changed its name first into National University and then AAU. The AAU even at the reign of the military government, remained as the major/flagship university, and served as an umbrella institution for different agriculture- and health science-related colleges and institutions, which were established at different corners of the country (Abeje, 2014; Melese, 2015). Nonetheless, Abeje (2014) unveils that during the time of 'Derg' (i.e., from 1974 up to 1991), except a few public HEIs, no private institution of higher learning was in operation in Ethiopia.

Rediet (2014) avows that in Ethiopia, the struggles towards mounting education across all levels have been reinforced particularly under the EPRDF's-led government since 1991. In this regard, the government started this job by promulgating the EETP in 1994. The ratification of the policy has brought a remarkable impact on the structure and content of the education system in general and on the realm of higher education in particular, and then served as a bedrock foundation, for the subsequent major higher education transformations that take place in the country (MoE, 2010). Consequently, following the launching of the policy, higher education bills and other legislative regulations have been widely enacted in the higher education scene in the country.

Regarding the proclamations, for instance, the first, 351/2003 higher education bill had endorsed in 2003 and functioned as a comprehensive national legal framework for the establishment, development, and provision of quality education of/in HEIs. Six years later, the first higher education proclamation had revised and overwhelmed by the second 650/2009 bill, which is at

present serving as the major legal working document, in the Ethiopian higher education sector¹⁰ (Rediet, 2014; Yohannes, 2016). Apart from the two proclamations, there are also a plethora of subsidiary legal policy directives (such as the successive ESDPs and others), which have been practiced in Ethiopia to accelerate the shifts in the higher education sector. At this juncture, Nwuke (2008) attests that such legal/policy initiatives have been primarily driven by the need to redress: the geographical and structural disparities and inequalities in higher education, the increasingly complex demand of both public and growing private sector for high-quality staff or workers, and the changing context of global and international competition in higher education.

In general, after the advent of those principal initiatives in the sphere of Ethiopian higher education, both private and public HEIs have grown drastically. The radical expansion of HEIs has created (or improved) opportunities in: enhancing access to students in higher education, reduction of the regional imbalances in higher education participation, boosting more particularly the involvement of female and less privileged students in higher education, and diversifying the field of studies in universities (Kedir, 2009; Nwuke, 2008; Tesfaye Semela, 2011). However, the uncontrolled and unbridled massification of higher education has also brought about some concomitant flaws such as a misalliance between an ever-growing student population and the availability of essential resources; difficulty in acquiring highly experienced academic staff especially for the newly opening universities; and overall, deterioration of quality and provision of quality education both in public and private HEIs (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2010; Girmaw, 2014). Thus, to curb these critical bottlenecks, and thereby to scale up the status of the higher education sector in the country, some relevant organizations like the HERQA and the HESC¹¹ are established.

5.3. Quality Assurance Systems in Ethiopian Higher Education

Rediet (2015) remarks that the commencement of a higher education EQA system in its current mode is a recent trend in Ethiopia. Rediet goes on to attest that rather, IQA systems have relatively long sustenance in the Ethiopian higher education sector, and through which every academic staff member has been judged by his or her own peers, students, and bosses at different levels.

¹⁰ At this right moment, Ethiopia has already endorsed another (the third) higher education bill i.e., proclamation number 1152/2019. This proclamation is not duly considered as part of this research study.

¹¹ Now it is known by the name ESC.

Moreover, in institutional quality assurance schemes, there have also been periodic course and curriculum reviews as crucial mechanisms, to ensure quality and the delivery of quality education in HEIs (Wondwosen, 2008). Nevertheless, since the last two decades, as the number of private and public HEIs are climbed in many folds than before, the HERQA was established to undertake particularly EQA that is aimed to foster quality and relevance and ensure the provision of quality education in public and private degree-granting HEIs in Ethiopia (Rediet, 2015; Tefera, 2014). In addition, in recent times, there is also a gradual move to gauge the performance and achievement of especially public universities against a set of standards or criteria that are put forward by the Consortium of Ethiopian Public Universities (Firdissa, 2013).

According to Tefera (2014), in the Ethiopian higher education system, the adoption of quality assurance and the decisions to launch the national or EQA agency and other institutional quality assurance units have occurred due to the enormous pressures exerted from so many internal (domestic) and external forces. Tefera further explains that among the internal pushing factors, the inability of the long-standing tradition of a nominal quality appraising practice to bring the necessary improvement and innovation in HEIs and the government's serious intention and interest to ensure accountability in a centralized and somewhat tightened manner can be mentioned as the most important ones. Also, some external issues such as the inherent motives and interests of the donor countries and agencies and other influential foreign advisors in the sector can be taken as very prominent factors, which have impacted the current higher education quality assurance systems and practices in Ethiopia (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2010; Tefera, 2014).

Overall, HERQA (2005) declares that to effectively materialize both IQA and EQA systems in HEIs, the HERQA is appeared to be agreed with the relevant presser groups, professional bodies, HEIs, and other concerned parties on the underlying conception of quality i.e., 'fitness for purpose' as a working definition of quality in Ethiopia. In this regard, the quality model that the HERQA currently uses for monitoring quality in HEIs has three indispensable elements: input, process, and output (HERQA, 2005). "One of the inputs is the design of a curriculum that eventually leads to the development of an educational program in a given department" (Tesfaye, 2015, p. 7). The curriculum is anticipated to be emanated from the desires of major actors and stakeholders in higher education, namely the government, employers, parents, students, and society at large (Tesfaye, 2015) (see Figure 5.2, below).

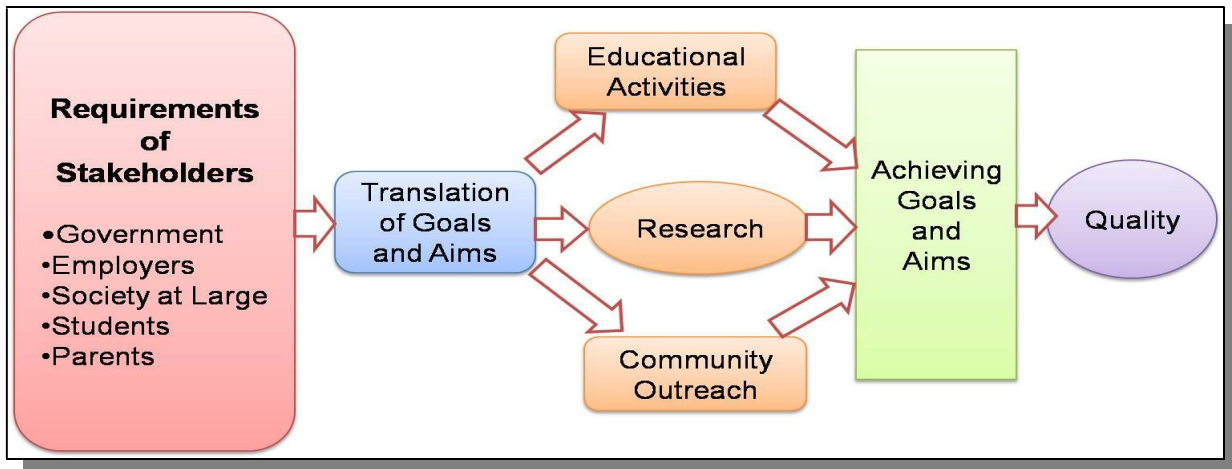


Figure 5.2 Quality Model in Higher Education in Ethiopia

Source: Tesfaye (2013, p. 22)

Most importantly, in the (higher education) quality model, a HEI needs to transform the interests and desires of major actors and stakeholders into pertinent goals and aims and thereby integrate with its core missions (perhaps this refers to the process aspect in the model), which comprise: educational activities or teaching-learning; research and extension endeavors and undertakings; and community engagement or outreach activities as means to achieve the already set goals, standards, and in turn to maintain quality i.e., the output aspect (Tesfaye, 2013).

5.4. EQA in Ethiopian Higher Education

As it has already been mentioned, quality assurance in the context of Ethiopian higher education is being carried out internally by individual HEIs themselves and externally by the HERQA. Particularly when it comes to EQA, it is mostly practiced in degree-granting HEIs in the country through quality audits and accreditations. For instance, the external quality audit process “comprises three distinct stages: assessment, preparation of a report, and follow-up action” (Tesfaye, 2015, p. 11). Tesfaye has further expounded that amidst the assessment phase, a team of external quality auditors undertakes an in-depth evaluation on SED and at the same time, conducts external review and validation of assessment of an auditee institution. After that, during the second phase, based on a review of a panel of external auditors, the HERQA produces a final quality audit report that is going to be officially dispatched to the general public (HERQA, 2006b; Tesfaye, 2013). The third and the last phase, particularly in the external audit process is “the

follow-up stage, which deals with the immediate changes and improvement actions institutions possibly take” (Tesfaye, 2015, p. 11). The aforesaid three stages also serve for accreditation that is currently in action only in private HEIs in the country.

In regard to the HERQA, as is indicated at different places in this paper, the agency was established in 2003 as the only external quality regulating entity in Ethiopia. Being accountable to the MoE¹² at the federal level, therefore, the HERQA is at the moment standing primarily to overseeing the relevance and quality of education that has been offered by (degree-granting) public and private HEIs in the country (Tesfaye, 2015). On top of that, the HERQA has been providing multidimensional supports to HEIs and conducting relevant workshops and training for selected academic staff, leaders, and quality assurance officers and experts in respective institutions (Tesfaye, 2013).

For Wondwosen (2008), as a whole, the HERQA has assumed fourteen specific duties and powers, for example, in the 351/2003 Ethiopian higher education proclamation; and they can be subsumed into the following major headings: ensuring quality and relevance in HEIs, assessing and evaluating HEIs’ accreditation and re-accreditation requests, preparing and dispensing important quality-related directives to HEIs, supervising and evaluating HEIs, and disclosing information about HEIs to the general public. Moreover, the HERQA through carrying out accreditation, re-accreditation, quality audits, and other similar activities, seeks to build up the confidence of all actors and stakeholders upon the quality of the education provision in public and private HEIs in the country (HERQA, 2006c, 2019).

¹² Since the end of 2018, the accountability of the HERQA goes to the newly established MoSHE.

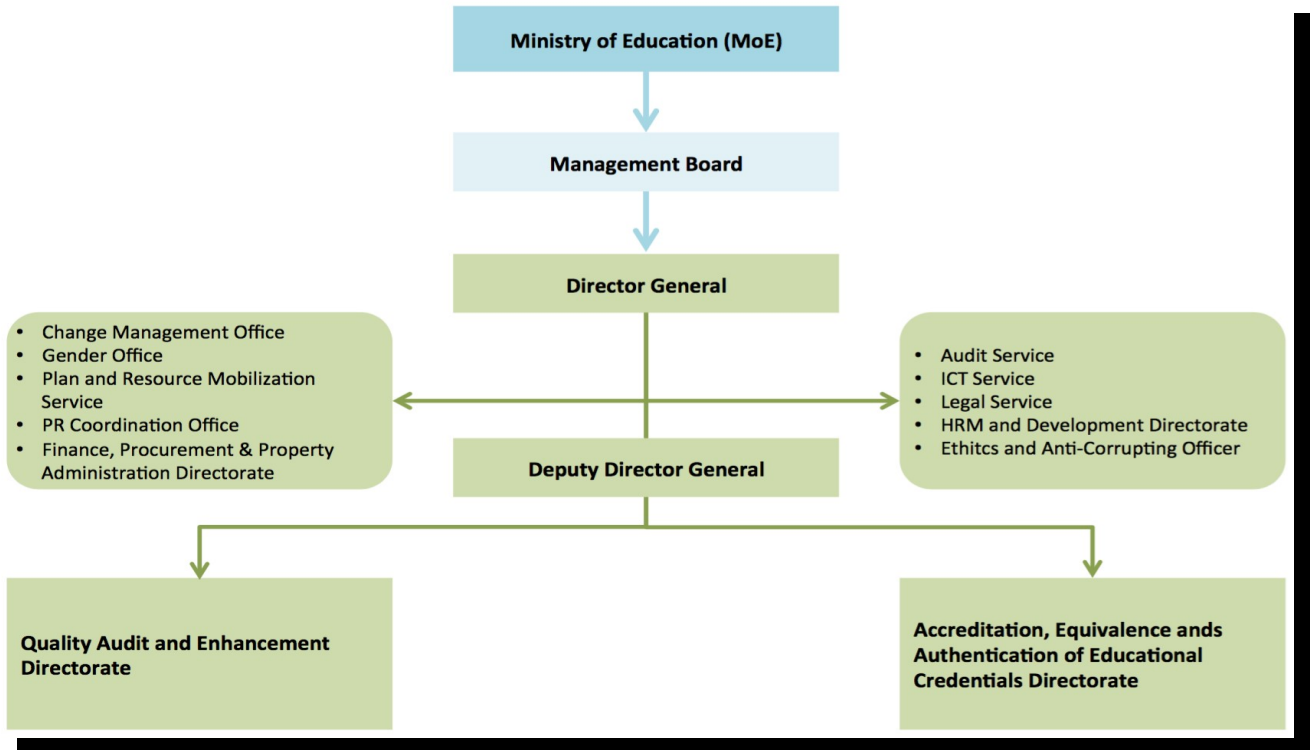


Figure 5.3 Organizational Structure of the HERQA

Source: Henson, Vroeijenstijn, and Elmer (2016, p. 26)

Eventually, concerning the organizational structure of the HERQA, to operate the EQA system (mainly external quality audits and accreditations), the HERQA has organized two major wings: Directorate for Quality Audit and Enhancement and Directorate for Accreditation, Equivalence, and Authentications of Educational Credentials. Besides, other supporting units in the HERQA are working on human resource issues and finance and information technology services (Henson et al., 2016; HERQA, 2014) (see Figure 5.3, above).

CHAPTER SIX

Results and Case-Specific Descriptions

The prime purpose of this research study is to portray the actual practices of EQA in the contexts of selected public and private universities in Ethiopia. To this end, mostly relying on the data that were gleaned using semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and document reviews, in this chapter, the results of the study are presented for each of the case study universities. The presentation is framed thematically in consonant with the fundamental research questions of the study, and implicitly and/or explicitly taking into account the foremost constructs in the conceptual framework.

6.1. Case I: Dilla University (DU) – A Public University

Here, the results (and case-specific descriptions) were put forward emphasizing the following major themes: the general context of the university, essential features of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, implementation practices of the EQA system, and lastly, the perceived outcomes of the EQA scheme. Besides these major thematic areas, numerous sub-themes are also surfaced in the midst of the presentation of results for public case study university.

6.1.1. The General Context of the University

Dilla University, one of the state-owned or public universities in Ethiopia resides in Dilla town, which is the capital of the ‘Gedeo zone’ in the SNNPRS. Located 360 kilometers south of Addis Ababa, Dilla town is a residential area of multi-nationalities and where vigorous trade activities are carried out (Public and International Relations Directorate [PIRD]). Currently, the university is the largest educational facility in the Gedeo zone. As an educational excellence and research center, the university at the moment strives hard to conquer its vision and ensure the socio-economic development of the surrounding and the national community as a whole (PIRD).

Historically, the university was an extension of the former Dilla College of Teachers’ Education and Health Sciences, which started its operation in 1996. As the name indicates, the then Dilla College of Teachers’ Education and Health Sciences had constituted two different faculties: the

faculty of teacher's education and the faculty of health sciences. Nevertheless, in the year 2001, the college was included in the then newly emerging university i.e., Debu University¹³ following the transfer of the health science faculty from Dilla town to Hawassa city. The name Dilla College of Teachers' Education had maintained until 2006 when the college grew to a full-fledged university with the name DU by the councils of ministers' regulation number 129/2006 (Dilla University [DU], 2014; HERQA, 2013; PIRD). According to the Councils of Ministers' Regulation, which is meant to provide for the re-establishment of the DU¹⁴, the university is accountable to the MoE/now MoSHE (FDRE, 2011).

When the institution began operating as a college, it had twelve different departments or educational units with a total student population of less than four-hundred, in a single campus. After that, the university has carried out various forms of expansion in its programs and infrastructures and expanded its services to other campuses (HERQA, 2013). Consequently, at present, the university is operating in three campuses (the fourth is underway), with seven colleges, four institutes, and three schools, which offer more than fifty-three undergraduate, thirty-seven post-graduate (masters) programs, and one PhD program with a student population of more than thirty-one thousand in regular and continuing education programs (PIRD). Concerning EQA, to date, the external institutional quality audit has been conducted in the university only at once, that is, in 2012 (HERQA, 2013).

On top of these achievements, the university is envisioned "to be among the top-ten universities in East Africa in teaching-learning, research, and community services by the year 2023" (DU, 2014, p. 10). In line with the overarching vision statement, the university has also developed its own specific missions. The university's core missions are:

Prepare knowledgeable, skilled, and mature graduates; design and provide training and community services pertinent to the country's and the region's priority needs; and promote and enhance research and consultancy services that shall cater to the development needs and policy imperatives of the country (DU, 2014, p. 10).

Likewise, the council of ministers regulations number 129/2006, which is a founding document of the university describes that the university shall have the objectives to:

¹³ The then Debu university is currently known by the name –Hawassa university.

¹⁴ This refers to the councils of ministers' regulation number 238/2011.

...produce skilled manpower in quantity and quality that understands clearly its constitutional rights and duties and that will serve the country in different professions; provide higher education services that are free from any discrimination on grounds of race, religion, sex, politics, etc.; lay down problem-solving educational and institutional system that enables to utilize potential resources of the country and undertake study and research; provide higher education and community services that are compatible with the needs and development of the country and the regional state; lay down institutional system that ensures transparency and accountability; ensure the participation of all concerned bodies in the administrative decision-making process, create and promote participatory culture; develop and disseminate the democratic culture of respect, tolerance, and living together among the people; and provide consultancy and training services on the basis of fees (FDRE, 2006, p. 3486).

In the aforementioned vision, missions, and major goals or objectives of the university, the issue of quality has been granted a critical position in areas like teaching-learning, research, and community engagement or services. Among other things, quality in these areas can be attained through effective application of different (external and internal) quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms and the establishment of strong organizational quality culture in the institution. Of these, the results on the actual practices of EQA in public case university are going to be presented in the succeeding parts.

6.1.2. Essential Features of the Ethiopian Higher Education EQA System

Under this part, the results are put forward focusing on the following two major sub-thematic areas such as defining the EQA system and purposes of the EQA system.

6.1.2.1. Defining the EQA System

It is a known fact that people might have forwarded different views and opinions of the same practice even in a similar circumstance. Perhaps this is emanated from their previous exposures and experiences or other multifaceted factors. On this basis, therefore, it is apparent to expect the informants in this study to perceive or understand the EQA system in diverse manners. Such various paths of conceptualizing and understanding the EQA arrangement need to be better recognized and analyzed. In so doing, the recontextualization and the reconfiguration of the existing EQA system and its practices might have happened in the ambit of the Ethiopian higher education system.

Equipped with this assumption, I have managed to present the results regarding the attached or constructed meanings towards the Ethiopian higher education EQA system and then look for the possible patterns in the conceptualizations and understandings of the system.

To achieve this end, several interviews and FGD informants from case study public university were requested to provide or construct their own meanings based on what they see, understand, and experience about the EQA system that is in place in their institution (under the auspice of the HERQA). In this regard, for example, one of the interview respondents conveys his accounts in the following quote:

EQA is currently taking place in our university through the execution of a set of activities, which comprise supervision, evaluation, and regulation ... not only by the HERQA but also even by the MoE¹⁵ for which the university is accountable, according to the already ratified higher education bills in the years 2003 and 2009... Hence, based on the existing reality, EQA to me, is an external endeavor that is meant to manage and govern the quality of HEIs in the country (DQA3, on the 28th of August 2018).

To obtain many more important features of the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement, other informants' conceptions and views have also continued to be probed towards the same issue. In this respect, one interviewee has put his viewpoints as follows:

I can describe the existing EQA system as a sporadic or patchy one, which takes place once in some years' intervals. It is like what we call in our country 'የ መስቀል ወፍ' [meaning: a bird, which appears very occasionally, within some period of time]... As a result, I can tell you that the EQA system has currently very little familiarity and acquaintance with the wider educational practitioners of the university (DD2, on September 23, 2018).

The above views and conceptions were also similarly reflected by the remaining interview and FGD informants from public case university. Thus, their points indicate that the existing EQA arrangement is an externally motivated one (i.e., alien to the university) and occurred very occasionally in the institution. In addition to these collective perspectives and assertions, one of the focus group participants somewhat uniquely contended that:

...it is better to mark out the EQA system as a means or mechanism that is used to assess and monitor the core activities of the HEIs or universities, and thereby to

¹⁵ Now it is changed into –MoSHE.

suggest a possible way out primarily to instigate and capacitate the institutions to maintain and assure the quality by their own... Therefore, in my view, the EQA system is partly becoming an ally in the quality maintenance and enhancement efforts that take place in the university (DAS3, on October 7, 2018).

From the above avowal, it is possible to infer that there is also a tendency at this university to put the EQA arrangement as an ally to the institution-wide quality assurance initiatives (though it has been in effect in the institution infrequently, in a limited range).

In general, of the range of views that were uttered by the interview respondents and the participants of FGD at the public institution, it has been observed that there is a great deal of shared commonality in conceptualizing the Ethiopian higher education EQA system. In this respect, the EQA arrangement is conceived as an externally initiated quality regulating process or activity, which is rarely in action in the institution.

6.1.2.2. Purposes of the EQA System

An EQA system can be put into place for the sake of meeting different objectives in HEIs. Among other issues, the purpose of an EQA arrangement is determined by the underlined political thoughts or ideologies of a country and the contexts or level of development of its higher education systems. However, sometimes this may not be explicitly manifested and in turn not well-understood by higher education actors and stakeholders at different levels. As a corollary, the effective implementation of an EQA system might be highly entangled with several setbacks on the ground. To rectify this, the actual motive or purpose of an EQA system needs to be well recognized and understood; and all the concerned actors and stakeholders are required to do their jobs accordingly for the successful accomplishment of the stipulated purposes.

In this study, therefore, I have tried to investigate the views and positions of the informants at the public university about the purposes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system as they are understood and experienced, being the member of the institution. In this respect, for instance, one of the focus group discussants summarizes the collective accounts of the group about the motives or purposes of the existing EQA arrangement as follows:

Even if the EQA system has the intention of controlling and regulating the quality and the quality attributing issues in our university and other degree-granting public HEIs in the country, the major emphasis seems to be placed on quality improvement.

Because at present, the HERQA is closely working with those of public HEIs throughout the country in operating the external institutional quality audit, which is supposed to be carried out once every five years... As is specified in various official documents of the HERQA, the key purpose of a quality audit is ensuring quality improvement in HEIs (DAS1, on October 7, 2018).

In the same vein, one interviewee has also further strengthened the above remarks in the following manner:

...the HERQA is working with our university mostly based on the will and the consent of the university itself (i.e., on a voluntary basis)... For example, when the HERQA had carried out the first external institutional quality audit some years ago in our university, it was held with full consent and negotiation with the university. So in my understanding, in every activity, the agency's intention or motive is more to ensure quality improvement via assisting and helping the university to strengthen its quality-assuring efforts although it is so limited and insufficient by any means (DD1, on the 22nd of August 2018).

In the aforementioned perspectives of the informants, it is substantiated that the EQA system has predominantly a quality improvement motive or intention. Nevertheless, still, some informants have claimed that in addition to the HERQA, even the MoSHE seems to have a mandate in the EQA process having slightly a different motive. In connection with this, one interviewee discloses his views and positions by comparing the roles that are being played by the MoSHE and the HERQA in the institution as follows:

To understand the purpose of the EQA system, it is obligatory to examine what is being done by different authorities to ensure the provision of quality education in our university, from outside i.e., mostly by the MoE¹⁶ and the HERQA... As public universities are accountable to the MoE¹⁷, it has the legal mandate to monitor and evaluate their activities and performances in accordance with their core missions. This kind of external way of ensuring and patronizing quality as to my knowledge, used to be more bureaucratic, less professional (or a bit politicized), and overly focused on controlling the day-to-day routines in the institutions... Nonetheless, the HERQA is also legally mandated to work on quality assurance with us. To me, the quality assurance process here is, not like what the ministry does with us; but it is a friendly and healthy one... The HERQA's intention is therefore to provide assistance or support to the quality improvement efforts of our own through short-term training, workshops,

¹⁶ Currently, it is known as the MoSHE.

¹⁷ For example, one of the Ethiopian higher education bills (i.e., 351/2003) claims that the public HEIs shall be established under the MoE by the regulation of the council of ministers. Actually, as it has been mentioned at different places in the paper, by now most of the degree-granting public HEIs are under the newly established MoSHE.

and irregularly planned and conducted an external institutional quality audit project (DP2, on September 5, 2018).

The above viewpoints indicate that the EQA system is being steered by the HERQA and the MoSHE, respectively having a purpose of quality improvement and quality control. Since the term EQA system is operationally coined in this research study in relation to the HERQA's rhetoric and action, many things are left to be described in connection with the MoSHE.

However, there also seems to exist some role confusions between the HERQA and the MoSHE in discharging their roles and responsibilities in assuring quality especially in public universities in the country. Still, as it has so far been revealed by the interview and focus group informants from the public institution, the motive or purpose of the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement appears to be inclined towards ensuring quality improvement than control.

6.1.2.3. Implementation Practices of the EQA System

Under this part, the results are presented regarding the external institutional quality audit approach and its implementation, and the concomitant internal or university-specific and external or non-university-specific challenges that are occurred during its implementation in public case institution.

6.1.3. The Quality Audit Approach and its Implementation

External institutional quality audit is the most commonly used EQA mechanism in public and private HEIs in Ethiopia. Quality audit is an overall assessment of the quality, relevance, and on the whole, the quality education provision of HEIs in the country. The quality audit process was conducted based upon the will and the consent of the auditee institutions having different focus areas and procedures, and usually ends up with the publication of the quality audit report that reveals the actual situation of the audited institution and the dissemination of the report to the key stakeholders. In this way, quality audit attempts to enhance and maintain the quality of education offers in HEIs and boost the confidence of all stakeholders in the quality and relevance of that provision (HERQA, 2013).

Particularly in public case study university, until now, the external institutional quality audit has been taken place only at one time. Regarding the entire process of the quality audit that has been

undertaken in the institution, the executive summary report (which was officially published and dispersed by the HERQA) briefly outlines that:

...this document reports on the institutional external quality audit of DU carried out by a team of five external auditors from April 24 to 27, 2012. The starting point for the audit was a SED prepared by the university. The quality audit centered on ten focus areas as set out by the HERQA to validate the SED, judging the extent to which the university is fit for its declared purpose and determining the level of confidence in the university's ability to provide relevant and appropriate higher education and safeguard the standards of its degrees. The EQA team spent four days at the university. During their visit, the team had thirteen formal meetings with members of the academic staff, one meeting with students, and one meeting with top management. Also, the team observed teaching in six classes and visited a range of facilities at three campuses, and met with individual academic staff, support staff, and top managers (p. 3)¹⁸.

Most of the interview and focus group informants from case study public institution have also confirmed what is succinctly so far outlined in the HERQA's final external institutional quality audit report that is produced on the DU and already disseminated to the general public. In this regard, for instance, one of the interview respondents based upon his experience, reveals his viewpoints about the overall scenarios in the quality audit process that observed in the institution in the following manner:

Before the actual quality audit had started, the university was requested to conduct an institution-based self-evaluation and then to produce a SED in line with ten mutually interrelated focal points or focus areas. Following the request of the HERQA, the university had organized a quality audit ad hoc team (from different units and sections) and started working on the self-evaluation process and at the same time, on the preparation of the SED under the close follow-up and supervision of the university presidents and the support of the HERQA. After the completion of the self-evaluation process and the preparation of the final SED, the SED was sent to the HERQA... After some time, a team of quality audit experts came and carried out formal and informal meetings and discussions with different members of the university community and conducted a series of observations in various places in the university... After that, the team had produced and presented a provisional/tentative report to the university's upper echelons...before the final quality audit result report was published and distributed to the public... At this level, one thing that needs to be known is that there was an appeal system to entertain the complaints of the institution in the course of the quality audit process (DQA2, on the 28th of August 2018).

¹⁸ Source: HERQA (2013).

Besides portraying the whole picture of the external institutional quality audit process (to have a better understanding of it), there is also a need to investigate and describe some of the important activities, which were accomplished in the course of the quality audit process. In this respect, one focus group participant from public university has summarized the views in the group and disclosed a lot of points particularly regarding the preparation process of a SED that is considered to be a critical landmark to commence and operate properly the quality audit:

...earlier to the groundwork of the SED had started, short briefings and orientations were given to some selected staff members of the university (ad hoc committee members) by experts of the HERQA about the preparation of the SED... The guest experts had told the ad hoc committee members that the institutional SED is demanded to be prepared principally based on the guideline/document, which is known by the name 'Preparing a Self-Evaluation Document'.¹⁹ There were also other related documents that the HERQA's experts had suggested the university to use to prepare the SED²⁰... Eventually, after many ups and downs (of conducting surveys in each educational unit and wing), the ad hoc committee members produced the final SED in adhering to the given blueprints from the HERQA... The whole self-evaluation process and producing a SED had taken some months... This was when the quality audit process had officially been commenced in the university (DAS5, on October 7, 2018).

In the above assertions, the SED has given a key place in undertaking external institutional quality audits in case study public university. In the same way, in respect to the use of conducting self-evaluation and producing a SED in the quality audit process, the HERQA's final quality audit report on public case institution unequivocally outlines that:

...the SED formed a useful starting base for the external quality audit providing both description and evaluation. From the account of the self-evaluation process, it is clear that it involved many people and there is no doubt that the university put a considerable effort into the self-evaluation and treated it as a serious activity (HERQA, 2013, p. 10).

According to the views of most of the informants at the public university, after submission of the final SED report to the HERQA, the team of experts that was composed of different professionals came and visited the university. During their visit to the university, they had gathered the necessary and relevant information in various ways and techniques from different sources and then

¹⁹ Source: HERQA (2006e).

²⁰ As is indicated in HERQA (2006e), there is also a necessity to make good use of other related documents to prepare a SED such as HERQA Profile (HERQA QA01/06/V1), Areas of Focus for Institutional Quality Audits (HERQA QA02/06/V1), Institutional Self-Evaluation (HERQA QA03/06/V1), and HERQA Institutional Audit Procedure (HERQA QA05/06/V1).

juxtaposed their findings against the SED report. At this juncture, the main tasks and activities of the external institutional quality audit team members were specifically indicated in the same quality audit report in the following manner:

The EQA team spent four days at the university. On advent, the EQA team reported to the liaison officer who was managing the audit visit. They also announced their presence and their mission to the president. Apart from the meetings with the president, during the four days, the team had thirteen meetings with members of staff, one meeting with students, and one meeting with top management. In addition, they observed teaching in six classes and visited teaching facilities, staff offices, school and department heads offices, library, computer laboratories, registrar, duplication center, cafeteria, lounge, dormitories, clinics, and sports facilities of all three campuses. During visits, they talked with staff and students. Furthermore, the team studied documentation and met together at least once each day for twenty minutes to discuss their findings and prepare for meetings. Except during classroom observations and visits to physical facilities, all the five audit team members worked together. On the final day, the team held a meeting to agree on a summary of the main findings of the audit team and presented this to the president and the two vice presidents (HERQA, 2013, p. 11).

As to several of the informants from public institution, after the possible enrichment had been made on the findings of the audit team, the external institutional quality audit final report was prepared and published and disseminated to the public. The terminal audit report aimed to pinpoint some of the strengths and weaknesses of the university around the three core mission areas such as teaching-learning, research, and community services; and within which it also addressed the specific ten focal points, including vision, mission, and educational goals; governance and management system; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; student admission and support services; program relevance and curriculum; teaching, learning, and assessment; student progression and graduate outcomes; research and outreach activities; and IQA.

Besides this, the final quality audit report also provided fifty-six essential recommendations, thirty-eight advisable recommendations, and twenty-seven desirable recommendations to the university (HERQA, 2013). Based on the sight of most of the informants, after that, it has become mostly the mandate and the responsibility of the university itself to prepare an appropriate action plan and put it properly into place. In the meantime, the HERQA is also demanded to strictly supervise the implementation process of the action plan and the fulfillment of the recommendations that are duly stipulated in the quality audit report (of the public university).

6.1.3.1. Implementation Challenges of the Quality Audit Mechanism

In this part, the results presented focus on the following sub-themes: external (non-university-specific) challenges and internal (university-specific) challenges. Under each thematic area, numerous specific challenges are put forward as critical setbacks of implementing the external institutional quality audit approach, particularly in case study public university. However, the order of presentation of the specific challenges under each category does not necessarily have a direct implication upon the level of intensity or severity of the hindrances in the institution.

6.1.3.1.1. External Setbacks

The first non-university-specific challenge of implementing the external institutional quality audit mechanism in public case institution has been raised in connection with the inability or inadequacy of the HERQA to perform its duties and responsibilities properly in close contact with the university. In this respect, several of the informants from the institution have uttered more or less similar standpoints. At first, for instance, one of the interview respondents describes the overall existing scenarios in relation to the HERQA as follows:

For me, the source of many of the challenges that are encountered in materializing the EQA system in general and in implementing the quality audit approach in particular, in the university is the current worsening status or the very limited capacity of the HERQA itself... At present, the HERQA has a very limited resource capacity and poor organizational structure, which do not go in line with the rapidly expanding higher education sector in the country... This has led the HERQA to be almost dysfunctional and generally the implementation of the EQA system to be at risk... To put it in concrete terms, last year, for example, our university should have been quality audited, but not yet... I can surely tell you that with its present capacity, the HERQA can never do a quality audit as per the plan, in all HEIs throughout the country... (DQA1, on the 28th of August 2018).

As it holds true elsewhere in the world, besides the capacity and capability of a national quality assurance agency, the level of diligence of its working staff or personnel also matters a lot on the overall success and achievement of an EQA system in its implementation in HEIs. Nevertheless, problems have also been raised by most of the informants with regard to the commitments of some persons, who came from the HERQA and involved in the course of the external institutional quality audit implementation in case study public university. At this juncture, one interview respondent reveals his stances in the following manner:

I think as everyone knows very well, the commitment and devotion of people in every activity are so crucial. Likewise, external actors have an irreplaceable role in planning, implementing, and evaluating EQA systems in HEIs. Nonetheless, in our particular context, what we see on the ground does not bear out this underlined assumption... If I tell you based on my real observation and experience, sometimes external assessors are less motivated as they are burdened too much with other extra responsibilities. As a consequence, they are unable to perform their jobs up to the required level. They often spend their time consulting documents and chatting with the university's higher officials instead of digging beneath the real quality bottlenecks at the grass-roots level... In this way, I can say these people are used to perform their jobs for satisfying the paper requirements rather than addressing the real challenges of the provision of quality education in the institution... (DQA3, on August 28, 2018).

In addition to the aforementioned non-university-specific challenges, the absence of proper response (it can be reward, inducement, or any other) based upon the outcomes of the external institutional quality audit; and the ineffectiveness of the HERQA to carry out strict follow-ups to enforce the essential recommendations that are stipulated in the quality audit terminal report are considered as the other problematic areas, by most of the informants at the public university. In this regard, one of the interview respondents expresses his views as follows:

In many countries of the world, based on the quality audit results, rewards or incentives of different kinds, are expected to be offered to the audited HEI... However, in our country, the quality audit has not yet been accompanied by any kind of reward or incentive... In fact, the follow-up especially, from the side of the HERQA to countercheck the implementation of the important recommendations of the quality audit report in the institution is almost negligible... I think this has greatly contributed the quality audit to be taken like as business as usual, in the university... (DQA2, on the 28th of August 2018).

Similarly, the discussants of the focus group interview have also uncovered many more non-university-specific challenges of implementing the external institutional quality audit approach in public case institution. In line with this, some of the collective accounts of the participants are summarized in the following quote:

Firstly, the lack of adequate qualified and skilled professionals (in the HERQA), who are in charge of, for instance, the quality audit and other EQA activities. Secondly, the presence of a top-down approach in implementing quality audits (as the initiation, implementation, and post-implementation processes are solely owned and regulated by the HERQA). Thirdly, the absence of sufficient participation of various stakeholders such as members of different professional associations, employers, etc. in the course of quality audits implementation. Fourthly, the presence of unclear intentions or motives in the EQA system, ambiguities in focus areas and standard quality indicators, and unbalanced coverage on the core activities or missions of HEIs in the quality audit

process. Fifthly, the application of the same quality audit parameters, standards, or criteria for all HEIs although they have very different contextual and objective realities. Sixthly, the presence of role confusions between the HERQA and the MoE²¹ (as both parties have been involving in similar quality monitoring and regulating activities in the university, sometimes even without recognizing one another). (On the 7th of October 2018).

In a nutshell, from the viewpoints of several of the informants at the public university, one can see that the implementation of external institutional quality audit has been thwarted by a range of external challenges (as they are revealed earlier). Also, as to them, such constraints have somewhat diminished the significant contributions of the EQA system in paving the way for the university to update and upgrade itself and its academic programs to be competent enough in the era of the knowledge economy.

6.1.3.1.2. Internal Setbacks

The first university-specific challenge that has been raised by most of the informants was related with the institutional leaders' inadequate commitment or motivation and skills to facilitate the EQA endeavors in case university. In this regard, for example, one of the interview respondents imparts his views based on his observation and experience as follows:

...in my university, there is high turnover and frequent reshuffling of senior managers and leaders. This observable situation created somewhat instability and opened up the room for the coming of new leaders, who do not have adequate skills and experience of managing different strategic issues properly in the university... For instance, to meet the fundamental requirements of the EQA and IQA modalities, there is a need to deploy the necessary human, material, and financial resources till the last educational unit in the institution and be able to monitor the process efficiently and effectively. However, in this respect, the existing leaders' diligence and skills seemed to be inadequate... This has resulted in the quality assurance endeavors, be it external or internal, to be of little worth to upkeep the provision of quality education in the institution (DD1, on August 22, 2018).

Besides this, the internal actors (i.e., teachers and other auxiliary staff) awareness of the quality assurance systems and their degree of engagement in the course of those systems implementation matter a lot in the successful accomplishment of the quality assurance goals in HEIs. Nevertheless, several of the informants have affirmed that this issue is the other problematic area of case study

²¹ At present, this (MoE) refers to the MoSHE.

public institution. In line with this, one interviewee conveys his standpoints in the following manner:

...I can say that there is a tendency (among the staff in the university) of considering the EQA arrangement purely as an external initiative, which imposes more burdens on the institution and the staff members... Perhaps this is emanated from the lack of awareness... Owing to the presence of such a predisposition, the participation of the academic and other staff is not sufficient in course of implementation of the EQA system in the university... This phenomenon has been dwindling the status of the EQA implementation practices in the institution (DD2, on September 23, 2018).

Likewise, in connection with the aforementioned issues, still, some other specific implementation challenges of the external institutional quality audit mechanism and other related EQA activities have been enumerated by the participants of the focus group interview in public case study university. In this regard, the collective accounts of those participants are succinctly presented as follows:

....the disinclination of leaders, teachers, etc. to properly understand the very essence of the EQA arrangement and its concomitant quality guaranteeing mechanisms; the resistance of leaders and teachers to fully cooperate with the external assessors and experts in the course of the EQA implementation; and the misunderstanding of the staff and leaders about the inherent motive of the EQA system (for example, as most of the higher officials and some of the academic staff in the university are afraid of the EQA system damaging the previous good reputation of the institution, when the quality audit result is publicized for the general public) (On October 7, 2018).

In all, from the views of the informants, it is possible to comprehend that there are a lot of university-specific setbacks of implementing the institutional external quality audit approach and other EQA deeds in case study public institution (as they are unveiled above). At this juncture, the informants also disclose that such challenges have led the EQA system to be inadequately and ineffectively implemented and in turn unable to serve its goals sufficiently in the institution as a whole.

6.1.4. The Perceived Outcomes of the EQA Scheme

Melaku (2008) states that higher education quality audit entails much cost in terms of time and money. Therefore, it is expected to have more positive effects in improving the quality and ensuring the quality education provision in an auditee institution. However, it is not that simple specifically to differentiate and designate the concomitant outcomes of an audit process in the

sphere of higher education. This is primarily because a certain registered impact in a HEI perhaps be the cumulative effect of multifaceted endeavors that are taking place in the institution itself.

Amidst all these complexities, the informants have attempted to mention the practical and potential outcomes of the EQA system (or particularly the external institutional quality audit approach) in public case university. For instance, one of the interview respondents revealed some of the positive outcomes as follows:

As to me, especially, the launching of quality audit as the crux of the EQA system, has brought about many good results in our university... For example, after the quality audit put in place in the institution, quality and quality attributing issues are seemed to be so sensitive among different groups/members of the university community such as senior, middle, and lower-level managers; academic staff members (teachers and researchers); students; and other auxiliary or administrative staff... Most importantly, the existing EQA arrangement has prompted the university to strengthen its internal quality enhancement and assurance modalities (DQA1, on the 28th of August 2018).

On top of the above-mentioned points, another interviewee utters his views regarding some other specific positive upshots or outcomes of the EQA system (as a whole, after the onset of the activity of the HERQA nation-wide) and the external institutional quality audit mechanism (after its implementation) in case institution in the following manner:

It is evident that various practical changes have been registered after the coming up of the HERQA in general, and following the implementation of the quality audit approach in particular, in the university... Since then, for instance, the university has: managed to launch quality assurance policies and strategies and sensitized the university community about those policies and strategies persistently; organized educational quality and audit directorate at the corporate level and established quality enhancement/improvement centers up to the grass-roots level; and (though not yet adequate) upheld its provision of quality education with the participation of different internal actors (DD1, on August 22, 2018).

Similarly, the focus group discussants have enumerated the rest of the positive outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system as of its implementation in case study public university. Therefore, their collective standpoints are presented as follows:

The implementation of the EQA system (or the quality audit mechanism) has: forced the university to label quality assurance as one of its mainstreamed activities; (a little bit) opened up chances for the leaders and other academic staff to be aware of the status of the quality education provision in the institution; prompted the university to inspect its core and subsidiary educative and non-educative tasks and activities; and

lastly, in general, instigated the university to work hard to instill a new organizational quality culture into which the provision of quality education could be ensured persistently (On the 7th of October 2018).

Overall, as to the standpoints of several of the informants, the initiation of the EQA system has somewhat provoked and impelled the institution to look more deeply into its gaps and then to bridge them up to the required levels.

Nevertheless, apart from the positive outcomes, still, the informants have reflected their perspectives upon the demerits of the EQA arrangement that is currently in place in the institution. In line with this, for example, one interview respondent points out that:

...my intention here is not totally to nullify the positive outcomes of the EQA system in general, and the quality audit mechanism in particular, in the university. Instead, it is just to show you the other side of the coin... As the EQA system has occasional application and loose enforcement of its approaches (in a continuous manner) in the institution, I believe the university tends to respond to the system superficially (i.e., for the sake of fulfilling the paper requirements). This trend seriously affected the quality enhancement efforts in the institution (DD2, on September 23, 2018).

Furthermore, most of the informants have asserted that the EQA system usually urges the university only to fulfill the externally motivated and imposed requirements, criteria, or standards, sometimes even without considering the objective realities of the institution itself. As a corollary, the university leaders and the academic and other staff members are bored with implementing the EQA system.

In all, concerning the outcomes of the EQA arrangement, there are mixed feelings among the informants. In fact, the outcome is not always expected to be positive, some negative or undesired effects also can happen in anyways.

6.2. Case II: Saint Mary's University (SMU) – A Private University

Like the first case study university, presentation of the results (and case-specific descriptions) here is undertaken based on the following major topical issues: the general background of the university, vital features of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, implementation practices of the EQA scheme, and lastly, the perceived outcomes the EQA system. In line with these major thematic areas, some sub-themes come into sight while presenting the results on private case university.

6.2.1.The General Background of the University

The SMU was established in 1998 under St. Mary's general education development private limited company with the head office in the city of Hawassa and a branch in the capital, Addis Ababa. The institution had commenced its operations in the same year with thirty-three students in Hawassa city and thirty-seven in the capital Addis Ababa, studying in three different departments i.e., departments of accounting, marketing, and law. Later in the same year, forty-nine students were joined in the third branch that was opened in Dilla town. In the last quarter of 1998, the institution admitted more than three-hundred students in Addis Ababa city in its Lideta campus and twenty-five other students in Dilla town (Center for Educational Improvement and Quality Assurance [CEIQA], 2017; HERQA, 2009; Saint Mary's University [SMU], 2017).

Envisaging the trend of development of the conventional mode of learning, in 1999 the institution had transferred its head office to Addis Ababa, Lideta campus, and opened the new department of secretarial science and office management (SMU, 2017). In September 2000, the department of computer science was also put in place in the institution. In the same year, the institution had realized the distance education division focusing on business and law disciplines. Since 2001, the distance education division has been making a prompt growth targeting the distance learners in the fields of teacher education that encompasses Amharic, English, Mathematics, Geography, and History (SMU, 2017).

In September 2002, the institution acquired a new compound at Maichew Square, where at present the regular and extension undergraduate programs are located. By the year 2003 and 2004, it had further expanded its services and started offering degree programs in marketing, management, accounting, and computer science; and the natural science stream on its part, under the faculty of the teacher education had begun offering diploma level training in subjects such as Biology, Chemistry, and Physics (SMU, 2017). In 2006, the institution was promoted to the level of the university college; and in the same year, in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi national open university (IGNOU), it had started offering masters programs (SMU, 2017).

The SMU is a full-fledged university as of 2013 (CEIQA, 2017), and currently runs many undergraduate and postgraduate academic programs in diverse fields of studies under its regular and distance education divisions with a student population of more than twenty-six thousand

(SMU, 2017). To date, the institution has been externally quality audited twice by the then MoE and the HERQA, in 2004 and 2008 (HERQA, 2004, 2009; SMU, 2017).

Furthermore, at the moment, the SMU has adapted its own vision, mission, and goals, which can best fit the existing level of development of the institution itself. For example, the vision statement declares that the university aspires to become one of the leading higher education centers of academic excellence in the three core activities of HEIs i.e., teaching-learning, research and publications, and community services in East Africa and contribute to the overall development of Ethiopia (CEIQA, 2017). Similarly, the university's mission is to offer conventional and distance education that is accessible to the society at large through reasonable tuition emphasizing quality and standards in teaching, research, and outreach services (SMU, 2017). On the basis of the underlying vision and mission statements, the university has also formulated some specific goals or objectives that are crucial to meet the standard requirements of the students and other stakeholders.

Accordingly, the goal of the SMU is to: offer relevant, diverse, learner-centered, and research-led programs of study; prepare graduates with the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes embodied in the graduate profile of academic programs; strengthen assessment methods that validly, reliably, and fairly evaluate measurable learning outcomes; promote technology-based, innovative, and inter-disciplinary learning environment; augment student support, staff development, facilities, and resources; undertake demand-driven research on local, national, and international issues and flaws; produce and disseminate research outcomes, teaching materials, and other publications; ensure the provision of need-based services to the community at large; initiate, sustain, and enhance a close network with local and international stakeholders; and put in place and keep in place a system that ensures responsibility and accountability towards the performance of tasks related with the attainment of the goals enshrined herein (CEIQA, 2017; SMU, 2017).

In general, from the above vision, mission, and goals or objectives of the university, it is possible to draw out that the institution is intending to: deliver quality education, produce and disseminate standard research outcomes, and convey several need-based services. To this effect, it is obvious that the university needs to pay due attention to the proper application of different quality enhancement and assurance approaches. Of these, the data presentation goes on regarding the actual practices of EQA in private case study university.

6.2.2. Vital Features of the Ethiopian Higher Education EQA System

Under this part, the results are presented emphasizing the following two interdependent sub-themes such as describing the EQA system and intentions of the EQA system.

6.2.2.1. Describing the EQA System

Here, the informants were asked to define or spell out the EQA system, or describe its overall ethos based on what they see, understand, and experience. This was meant to grasp their conceptions, views, and positions towards the EQA arrangement, which was in place in the institution. Therefore, multiple accounts of the informants have emerged on the subject of the study. In this regard, for instance, one of the interviewees puts his viewpoints as:

In my view, the Ethiopian EQA system can be labeled as an external way of regulating, controlling, and inspecting the day-to-day routines or activities of especially the degree-granting private HEIs or universities in the country... In this way, the system sometimes does not open up rooms for the private HEIs to do their jobs by their own full will and interest (SP2, on August 3, 2018).

Correspondingly, another interview respondent also utters his views and positions towards the general characteristics of the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement in the following manner:

...by and large, the Ethiopian EQA system is at the moment working with and for private institutions than public counterparts. However, most of the time, it has been emphasizing fault-finding than filling the gaps in those institutions (SQ1, on the 6th of August 2018).

In the preceding accounts of the informants, the EQA arrangement is depicted more of as an external way of patronizing the routines in private HEIs in the country. Even I have also observed similar kinds of views and positions from most of the rest of the informants in the institution. Nevertheless, still, there are some different assertions reflected on the existing EQA system in private case institution. In this respect, for example, one focus group participant recapitulates what has been discussed and affirmed in the group as follows:

...the Ethiopian EQA system has been outlined as a mechanism by which the meeting of the needed or prespecified educational standards or benchmarks are ensured, externally, in collaboration with the HEIs themselves, in the core areas or activities

such as teaching-learning, research, and community services (SA4, on the 19th of July 2018).

In the above collective views, the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement has been pigeonholed as an external way of managing and regulating the quality and the quality attributing issues in (private and public) HEIs, mostly in close contact and cooperation with the institutions themselves.

Nonetheless, such views and positions have not been held a preponderant place among most of the informants in case study private university. Instead, there is a strong tendency of seeing the EQA system typically as a nuisance or an imposition of the state or the national quality assurance agency (i.e., the HERQA) on private institutions; as it is manifested in the agency's attempt to regulate the day-to-day routines and schedules of the university.

6.2.2.2. Intentions of the EQA System

Quite related to the first sub-thematic area, under this part, the informants from case study private institution were asked to put forward their views and positions concerning the motives or purposes of the EQA system. This was done just to better understand their real feelings and opinions about the inherent intentions of the system. In connection with this, for instance, one of the interviewees has put his standpoints as follows:

As we all know, Ethiopia does not have a long tradition of privatization... Only in the last two and half decades, the country has made some transitions into the seemingly neo-liberal politico-economic thoughts and created somewhat fertile ground for the private HEIs to be existed and flourished. However, the mindset of the government and the general public at large has remained as it was before... No trust or confidence has yet been developed and established on the private partners in the higher education sector in the country... In such circumstances, it is hardly possible to expect the motives or intentions of the EQA system to be less impeding and more enabling for the private HEIs... As to me, the system is rather more stressing on controlling the private HEIs (SD2, on the 17th of August 2018).

More or less having a similar notion of understanding with the above interview respondent, another interviewee based on his understanding and experience, also expresses his perspectives on the purposes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement in the following quote:

At present, the Ethiopian EQA system is approached HEIs to fulfill diverse intentions and motives through different quality-assuring modalities such as quality audits,

accreditations, and surprise visits... Quality audit is mostly used for quality improvement purposes in both public and private degree-granting HEIs. While accreditation and surprise visits are employed to control and patronize the quality of and the provision of quality education in the private HEIs... Thus, I can see that there are dual drives of the EQA system, that is, quality improvement and quality control... (SP1, on August 9, 2018).

From the above views, it is not that difficult to understand that the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement has appeared to have twofold intentions or purposes (i.e., quality improvement and quality control) in private case university. Of these, it seems to be more inclined to quality control than quality improvement.

In addition to this, the discussants of the focus group have also put forward some of the remaining specific intentions or motives of the Ethiopian EQA system. These accounts of the participants are summarized by one of the group members as follows:

Overall, the EQA system in Ethiopia is meant to: evaluate private HEIs based upon predetermined (and sometimes subjective) criteria; differentiate and detect (trends of) fraudulent and dishonest activities/practices in private HEIs; check and patronize the status of the core activities of private HEIs against some pertinent quality standards and thresholds; provide timely information to the clients and the public at large on the status of the private HEIs and their respective academic programs; and (the lesser extent) provide support and assistance to encourage the quality assurance initiatives in private HEIs (SA5, on the 19th of July 2018).

In brief, from the aforementioned views and positions of several of the informants, it is possible to deduce that the intentions of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system tend to vary with the specific quality assurance mechanisms, which are at present in effect in the institution. For example, external institutional quality audit, most of the time, goes with the purpose of quality improvement instead of quality control. Whereas (academic program) accreditation and re-accreditation are mainly meant to reach quality control rather than striving directly for the continuous quality improvement agenda.

6.2.3. Implementation Practices of the EQA Scheme

Under this part, the results presented are concerned with the external institutional quality audit and the accreditation (and re-accreditation) mechanisms, their implementation, as well as the prominent challenges that are observed and experienced in the course of implementation of those EQA approaches in private case study university.

6.2.3.1. The Quality Audit and the Accreditations Approaches and their Implementation

At present, the EQA arrangement in Ethiopia is emphasizing the undertaking of the external institutional quality audit and the accreditation and re-accreditation approaches in private HEIs throughout the country. In private case university, for instance, the quality audit has so far been carried out two times (as is described before, firstly in 2004 and for the second time in 2008). In the first quality audit, some members of the institution, together with two VSO higher education management advisors working at the then MoE, had formed a group and started working on it. The group had then investigated and analyzed where the quality gaps might be occurring to determine the foci or concentration areas to carry out the institution-based quality audit (HERQA, 2004). The terminal quality audit report that was produced on the institution has continued to elaborate on this process:

This quality audit is probably the first of its kind within Ethiopia's HEIs and should enable the institution to be in the vanguard of quality assessment developments and policy in the country... In the quality audit process, the team decided that the focus should be the aims and intentions of the institution. They decided that the starting point would be to define what quality might look like in the Ethiopian context with respect to course documentation, teaching and learning experiences, and assessment and evaluation practices (HERQA, 2004, pp. 2-3).

Also, as is indicated in HERQA (2004), after the institutional quality audit had taken place in case study private institution, the results were put forward focusing on the following areas: the quality of the evaluation systems; the quality of teaching (i.e., instruction and its support, assessment, and staff development); the quality of links with schools, business, and industry (including collaboration and preparation for the world of work); and the quality of commitment to democratic processes and reasonable citizenship (which includes consultation and respect, equity of opportunity, and HIV/AIDS). Under each of these domains in the quality audit report, the areas of good practice and the areas of possible development were specifically indicated. Finally, in the terminal report of the first quality audit, key recommendations were also given to the audited institution, and these recommendations fell into four giant categories: staff development, HIV/AIDS, assessment, and links with outside organizations and the community (HERQA, 2004).

Generally, with regard to the first institutional quality audit, much is not known among many of the informants at the private institution. However, herein to be revealed as a final remark about it,

one of the interview respondents in the institution based on his observation, briefly narrates on the major circumstances that occurred in the first institutional audit:

As the first trial to conduct a quality audit, the moment can be considered as a breakthrough, in the historical trajectory of Ethiopia and the institution as well... In this regard, it served as a springboard, as a whole, for the country's higher education EQA system to be kindled to uphold the quality and the provision of quality education in public and private HEIs... However, at that time, the quality audit process was not strictly guided by well-articulated guidelines and documents and was also not adequately supported by the necessary human, financial, and material resources (SP1, on August 9, 2018).

After the first quality audit, for the second time, the quality audit had taken place in case study private university in 2008 and the final audit report published and disseminated a year after in 2009. Unlike the first one, the second external institutional quality audit had passed through several stages and procedures. According to the views of most of the informants, at first, the institution was asked to conduct self-evaluation based on the renowned ten focus areas: vision, mission, and educational goals; governance and management system; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; student admission and support services; program relevance and curriculum; teaching, learning, and assessment; student progression and graduate outcomes; research and outreach activities; and IQA. After that (i.e., after the end of the self-evaluation process), one interviewee unveils that:

...the SED had produced and sent to the HERQA. After some time, the quality audit team that was composed of different professionals and experts came to undertake a short visit to the institution... (SQA1, on the 6th of August 2018).

HERQA (2009) states that the key purpose of conducting the institutional visit by the quality audit team members is to validate the SED that is submitted to the HERQA by the auditee institution. During and after the institutional visit, a number of activities had performed in connection with the quality audit process in private case institution. In this regard, another interview respondent mentions some of these activities as follows:

Amid the visit, the team members had: consulted various institutional documents, manuals, and policy statements or directives; conducted different meetings with officials, academic and auxiliary staff members, and students; and undertaken a series of observations in classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and other different areas... At the end of the visit, the team presented its tentative report to the higher officials of the university and reached on consensus... After some time interval, the team members

(perhaps along with the other HERQA's staff) drafted the first well-compiled quality audit report and sent it to the institution (via the HERQA) for its factual accuracy and truthfulness... After that, the HERQA incorporated some of the concerns of the institution and finally published and officially disseminated the terminal quality audit report to the public... (SQA2, on August 7, 2018).

As is shown in the external institutional quality audit terminal report of private case university²², the quality audit report needs to make evident the HERQA's confidence in the ability of the institution to provide an appropriate level of quality education to its clients and the general public at large. Furthermore, this report aspires to scaffold the institution by recognizing its good practices or reputations and by demonstrating areas where changes in provision and practice can augment the quality and/or relevance of its core educational activities. To achieve this end, most of the informants disclose that eventually, based on the recommendations that were stipulated in the final quality audit report, the institution was requested to prepare an action plan in a way that pursues to foster the quality and relevance of its educational provision and submit to the HERQA. This is primarily meant to monitor the implementation of the action plan and to oversee the level of the execution of the major recommendations in the institution.

In addition to the external institutional quality audit, there are still other common EQA approaches, which are currently in place only in private HEIs in Ethiopia, notably academic program accreditation and re-accreditation. Initially, the HERQA was trying to employ a three-stepped program accreditation process that includes pre-accreditation, accreditation, and re-accreditation. Later on, with the promulgation of the second Ethiopian higher education decree (i.e., proclamation number 650/2009), the three-stepped accreditation process altered into a two-stepped presently existing accreditation process that only embraces accreditation and re-accreditation (FDRE, 2009; MoE, 2003).

In views of most of the informants, the SMU, as one of the degree-granting private HEIs in the country, several of its academic programs have been passed through (and still passing through) a set of (pre-accreditation) accreditation and re-accreditation procedures.

Pertaining to the overall nature of the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms and their respective procedures, the interview respondents and the participants of the

²² This refers to the HERQA (2009).

focus group from the institution have raised a lot of crucial points. For example, one of the interviewees describes the general scenarios in the accreditation and re-accreditation that are taking place in his institution in the following manner:

At present, accreditation (whether it is program or institution-based) is being carried out only in private HEIs in the country. Concerning program accreditations, as is stipulated in the second proclamation²³ and other relevant documents of the HERQA, they are means of gauging the educational programs to ensure their level of conformity and compliance to the accreditation standards or criteria (as minutest requests to open and/or run different programs)... About the accreditations procedures, for instance, to open a new program, now the university is directly applying for accreditation instead of pre-accreditation... Once the accreditation license is secured, the accredited program will be guaranteed for the consecutive three years... Then, before the end of the accreditation period, another request may be there for re-accreditation of the same academic program... Again, after the re-accreditation, the program will be guaranteed for another five successive years without undergoing any other form of accreditation (SP2, on the 3rd August 2018).

Based on the result of the reviews of some documents or sources of the HERQA (e.g., HERQA, 2016, 2019), it is substantiated that accreditation and re-accreditation are being used to license and relicense the educational programs in the same way, in all degree-granting private HEIs throughout the country. Moreover, as is claimed in the HERQA (2016), the process of the academic program accreditation (especially for the newly coming private HEIs) goes on in adhering to the following specific and obligatory procedures:

Before the application for accreditation, a HEI shall take an orientation on the sector and guidelines/standards. This is mandatory for a new HEI applying for the first time and the agency²⁴ advises the owner of a new HEI applying for accreditation should take part in the orientation. After the HEI has finished its preparation and made sure for the fulfillment of the requirements, it can apply for accreditation both by writing a request letter as well as filling in the application form provided by the Agency upon request (p. 1).

Even after writing a request letter and filling in the application form, there are a lot of specific activities to be done in the course of program accreditation. In this respect, based on his practical experience, one interview respondent from private case university has endeavored to jot down some of these activities as follows:

²³ The proclamation herein refers to the Ethiopian higher education bill number 650/2009.

²⁴ The 'agency' in this assertion refers to the HERQA.

...after the application is submitted, the site visit can be arranged. In line with the schedule, the assigned external assessors conduct visits to the institution. During their visits, the assessors evaluate the educational program/s based upon the program accreditation standards and checklists; and at the end, they prepare a final report to be submitted to the director-general of the HERQA... If the director accepts the report, he/she will send it to the MoE²⁵ with his/her approval... If also the MoE agrees with the report and the approval of the director-general of the HERQA, the license shall be granted to the program/s and the status will be officially communicated to the public via print and other electronic media... Indeed, as I saw recently, there is a new trend that the HERQA itself approves the accreditation of the academic programs without waiting for the decisions of the MoE... This new trend works only if there is no denial of the accreditation of the academic programs by the HERQA... Here, it should not be overlooked that for the complaints of the institution (if any) there is also an appeal system to follow... (SP3, on August 2, 2018).

In the viewpoints of most of the informants, even after the educational program is accredited or licensed, there might be unofficial visits (perhaps surprise visits) conducted by the HERQA to make sure that whether the accredited program is operational up to the required standard or not.

The academic program re-accreditation process is also awaited more or less to go through those rigorous, specific procedures and fulfill virtually all the criteria or standards that are applied to accredit the educational program/s in the institution.

6.2.3.2. Implementation Challenges of the Quality Audit and the Accreditations Mechanisms

Here, the results presented are regarding some non-university-specific (external) and university-specific (internal) implementation challenges of the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation approaches, particularly in the case of study private institution. Nevertheless, the order of presentation of the specific challenges under each category does not necessarily have a direct connection with the degree of intensity or severity of the hindrances in the institution.

6.2.3.2.1. External Hindrances

The first external challenge has been raised in connection with the overall intentions of some of the existing national, government policy provisions. In this respect, there is a wide prevalence of assumption among most of the informants that ascertains particularly the two higher education

²⁵ In all the interview respondent's assertions, the then MoE is at the moment referring to the MoSHE.

bills (i.e., 351/2003 and 650/2009) advocate different standards in public and private HEIs in the country. This phenomenon has therefore been considered as one of the major external setbacks, that hampers the proper implementation of the EQA system (its approaches) in private case university. In this vein, for instance, one interviewee opines that:

...in Ethiopia, private HEIs, unlike public institutions, are forced to go through strict external quality controlling mechanisms and required to fulfill complex standards and criteria. This dichotomization is thought to be backed by the existing national educational policy provisions (e.g., the first and the second proclamations²⁶)... This policy-based partiality or bias has created a sense of despair and frustration among the private communities and in response, somewhat crippled the effective implementation of the EQA system in those of privately owned HEIs, including our university too (SP1, on August 9, 2018).

Similarly, another interviewee elaborates on the what ‘double standard’, labelling mean as a non-university-specific challenge of implementing the EQA system in private case institution.

...for example, when we see the real practice of the program accreditations, it is discouraging... This makes the opening of the new and timely educational programs on one hand, and the relaunching of the existing programs on the other hand, very difficult in the university. However, this does not work for public HEIs in the country... Thus, this ‘double standard’ in tandem with the existing awkward accreditations procedures made the implementation of the EQA system at risk in the institution (SQA2, on the 7th of August 2018).

In addition to the above-mentioned points, most of the informants in the study have also labeled the existing inadequate support and encouragement of the HERQA and the MoSHE to capacitate the institution to satisfy the national quality standards or requirements as the other non-university-specific implementation challenge of the EQA system in private case university. In this regard, one of the interviewees explicates that:

I do not think that there is a trend of considering private HEIs as true partners, in the higher education scene in Ethiopia. That is probably why the HERQA, the MoE²⁷, or the other regional educational offices in the country have not yet had any viable platform to render support and assistance to the private HEIs in their endeavors to beef up the provision of quality education... Even particularly, the HERQA’s professional and technical support and its meticulousness in spreading valuable national and global experiences and practices to private HEIs are very limited...

²⁶ This is referring to the Ethiopian higher education proclamations i.e., 351/2003 and 650/2009, respectively.

²⁷ At the moment, the MoE refers to the MoSHE.

Hence, these circumstances have contributed the private higher education sector to be less powerful and in turn not to be able to triumph over the EQA requirements... This also holds true in the case of my university too (SD2, on August 17, 2018).

On top of the aforesaid issues, the focus group discussants have enumerated some specific external challenges that are encountered in the course of implementing the major EQA mechanisms (such as external institutional quality audit and academic program accreditation or re-accreditation) in case study private university. Thus, the collective accounts of the FGD participants are briefly presented in the following quote:

Firstly, the limited autonomy of the HERQA (as it functions under the MoSHE, and there is an interference of the ministry in various decisions of the HERQA). Secondly, the inadequate capacity and capability of the HERQA (as the HERQA is highly dependent upon very limited funds and the regular budgets of the government). Thirdly, the absence of adequate involvement of different external stakeholders, notably members of professional associations, employers, etc. in the course of the EQA system implementation in the institution. Fourthly, the use of stringent, rigid, or authoritative methods/ways of gauging the quality and the provision of quality education in the university (by the HERQA). Fifthly, the presence of a narrower focus in accreditations (more input-based) as well as a disproportionate emphasis in quality audit (overemphasizes on the teaching and learning processes than research and community services). Sixthly, the use of less relevant and sometimes unrealistic criteria amidst implementing the quality audit and the accreditations mechanisms in the institution (On July 19, 2018).

In brief, from the standpoints of the interview and focus group informants, it is possible to understand that the implementation of institutional external quality audit and academic program accreditation and re-accreditation in case institution has been affected by a range of non-university-specific challenges (as they are uncovered earlier). Also, according to them, these constraints have led, on the whole, the implementation of the EQA system to be somewhat impaired, and thereby fail to bring changes in the institution to ensure better quality education provision.

6.2.3.2.2. Internal Hindrances

Amongst the major university-specific challenges, the first one has been raised in relation to the existing limited and inadequate commitment and skills (capabilities) of especially some of the senior managerial staff and academic leaders to properly facilitate the enforcement of the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation

mechanisms in private case institution. In line with this, for example, one interviewee reports his views in the following manner:

...institutional leaders' commitment and competence to lead and influence other workers and to deploy the necessary resources to perform various activities in a given organization are so decisive. The keenness of leaders is also very crucial to effectively operate quality assurance systems and at the same time, to respond properly towards their essential requirements in HEIs... Nevertheless, as to my assessment, the dedication of some of our key leaders to respond to the requirements of the EQA arrangement and their ability to mobilize essential resources in the course of the EQA system implementation in the institution are still limited and inadequate. Rather, most of the time, they have been steered by the immediate urges of the HERQA... To me, such pitfalls impeded the effective implementation of the EQA system in the university (SD1, on the 15th of August 2018).

Besides the aforementioned issues, another internal challenge of implementing the major EQA mechanisms in private case study university has been raised by most of the informants in connection with the negative attitude, the internal actors or practitioners (such as the academic and other auxiliary staff members) have towards the EQA system. In this regard, one of the interview respondents reveals that:

...there is an inclination of seeing the EQA system among some academic and other staff members in the university, as a government bullet, which is used to attack or harm their institution in the guise of quality assurance. If the university is in a problem, they do believe that their job security would be at risk... Due to this reason, these groups of people in the institution, most of the time, do not want to cooperate honestly with the external assessors, and reluctant to respond genuinely to the requirements of the existing EQA approaches... I think this has been adversely affecting the implementation of the EQA system in the university (SQA1, on August 6, 2018).

In a similar vein, the participants of the focus group have added other specific internal challenges of implementing the institutional external quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms in private case institution. Hence, their collective viewpoints are presented in the following quote:

Firstly, disinclination to understand the real motives of the EQA arrangement (among some administrative and academic staff in the university). Secondly, the absence of awareness creation and raising in the institution stressing on quality and quality attributing issues. Thirdly, the lack of active participation of the internal actors or practitioners amidst the implementation of the major EQA approaches in the university. Fourthly, the lack of adequate capacity (in terms of financial, human, and

material resources) to fulfill the essential requirements of the EQA system (in the institution) (On the 19th of July 2018).

In summary, from the standpoints of the informants, one can comprehend that the implementation of the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation approaches in case study private university has been affected by a plethora of university-specific challenges (as they are disclosed earlier). Also, as to them, such restraints have somewhat smashed the positive contributions of the EQA system in the institution.

6.2.4. The Perceived Outcomes of the EQA System

As is indicated at different places in this research, at present, the external institutional quality audit is being equally applied in public and private HEIs in Ethiopia. Whereas accreditation and re-accreditation are currently in effect only in private institutions. Here, therefore, several of the interview and focus group informants have forwarded their views and opinions concentrating on the outcomes of the quality audit and the accreditation and re-accreditation approaches. In this respect, for instance, one interview respondent regarding the overall positive outcomes, conveys his notions as follows:

...after the launching of quality audit and accreditations: the IQA system is a bit strengthened in the university; the awareness of the leaders and staff members on quality and quality attributing issues is a little bit improved; the university is enthused to inaugurate and execute quality-centered strategic plans; etc. Overall, with all its shortcomings, I do believe that the commencement of the EQA system has served as the landmark for the university, to revisit and reconfigure its previous ways of quality safeguarding strategies and mechanisms... Hence, if the EQA system is fully (properly) implemented in public and private HEIs, in addition to its institutional importance, it would contribute a lot to the better growth and development of the higher education sector in the country as well (SP3, on August 2, 2018).

Likewise, another interviewee expresses his views concerning the positive outcomes of the individual EQA approaches (i.e., institutional external quality audit and academic program accreditation and re-accreditation) that are in place in the institution in the following manner:

...I think quality audit has: played a significant role the university community to be a bit familiar with the concept of quality and quality assurance; stepped up the institution's readiness to satisfy various quality-related standards and requirements; and instigated the university to work hard more or less relying on the three core missions of HEIs such as teaching-learning, research, and community engagement activities. While accreditations have: made the university (community) to be a bit

acquainted with the existing national and international, program-specific quality benchmarks or thresholds and helped the institution to launch standardized academic programs (SQA2, on the 7th of August 2018).

Besides, the discussants of the focus group have listed the positive outcomes of the EQA system (or its approaches) in private case university. Thus, their shared assertions are briefly summarized as follows:

The implementation of the EQA system has: opened up chances for the university to properly discern its strengths and weaknesses in major educational areas and instructional activities; urged the university to fulfill the fundamental standards or criteria in connection with aspects of educational input, process, and output; initiated the university to meet versatile national and international standards and benchmarks in different specializations or academic programs; inspired the university to learn from the best experiences of other public and private HEIs in the country; and helped to inform about the overall status of the institution and its educational programs to the general public and the clients (On July 19, 2018).

In short, as to the standpoints of most of the informants, the EQA arrangement has somewhat helped or enabled the university to uphold its quality, and thereby to deliver quality education or services to the students and other clients.

However, apart from this, the informants have also enunciated their views and opinions about the undesired outcomes of the EQA system in private case institution. In this regard, for example, one interviewee divulges that:

...due to the HERQA's dichotomous treatment of private HEIs in contrast to public institutions and other implicitly manifested biased trends in the EQA system, in the country, there is a tendency of seeing most private HEIs as fraudulent institutions, and excessive profit-seekers... It is simply, a matter of putting all within the same basket!... Anyway, this has resulted in the dubiety of many people on the level of the provision of quality education in and on the graduates' degree of competence from private institutions... In this respect, it is possible to conclude that the EQA arrangement (besides its positive outcomes) has been contributing, to a certain extent, to the current weak and fragile status of the private higher education sector in the country... (SP2, on August 3, 2018).

Moreover, most of the informants have avowed that the persisting top-down implementation pattern of the EQA system creates a lot of apprehensions among the leaders and other staff members in the university so that this has also been considered as the other demerit of the system.

In all, it is known that externally initiated quality assurance strategies and mechanisms like any other activities that take place in HEIs may not always bring about only the necessary good results. Rather, as is presented above, the outcomes may have a manifestation of two folds i.e., positive and negative. Hence, there should be ways especially to mitigate the fallouts, and thereby to scale up the status of the current EQA practice in private case university.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cross-Case Analysis and Analytic Discussions

In line with the very nature of a comparative case study research design, results are offered and analyzed at two stages: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis. Therefore, first, I have presented the analysis based on the data that were gleaned through the interviews, FGDs, and document reviews individually, for each case study university in the previous chapter. Next to that, now, the results that are extracted from each of the case institutions are combined, compared, and analytically discussed consistent with the basic research questions and the leading constructs of the conceptual framework of the study, in a way that can uncover the similarities and differences between selected two cases.

Here, the comparative analysis and the analytic discussion were carried out emphasizing on the following three major thematic categories or topics: analyzing the inherent characteristics of the EQA system, examining the implementation practices of the EQA system, and lastly, scrutinizing the outcomes of the EQA system.

7.1. Analyzing the Inherent Characteristics of the EQA System

To better understand the actual practices of EQA, and in this respect, to apprehend the similarities and differences in case study public and private universities, it is needless to say about the importance of portraying and analyzing the conceptions, views, and positions of the informants on the essential features of the EQA system in the contexts of the respective institutions.

To begin with, Gvaramadze (2008) remarks that quality is not complete in itself, but rather compromising and relative to the processes and local contexts and circumstances and that is presented in terms of preferred outcomes. So, it is more of a context-bounded concept and still open to entertain many interpretations from divergent interest groups as well. By the same token, the term quality assurance, be it internal or external, is mainly conceptualized in various ways by actors or stakeholders in higher education.

Likewise, this research study has showed that there are a lot of similarities and differences in conceptualizing and defining the Ethiopian higher education EQA system in public and private

case study universities. For instance, overall, in the attached or constructed meanings towards the existing EQA system, there seems to have been a similar tendency among most of the informants from the two institutions to see it as an externally motivated and alien one, which has been decoupled from or loosely coupled with the mainstreamed activities of the institutions themselves.

Apart from these shared similarities, a number of differences have been revealed in the study based on the conceptions and views of the informants towards the EQA arrangement that is in effect in the respective case universities. For example, among several of the informants from the private university, there is an inclination to mark out the EQA system more as an external imposition of the government (or the HERQA) on the institution in a way to patronize the everyday routines and schedules of the university. Whereas in the public university, most of the informants have tried to put the EQA system as an externally instigated quality-assuring process, that takes place very occasionally in the institution.

Also as the key owner and partner of the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement, at this juncture, the interview respondents from the HERQA and MoSHE have expressed their standpoints towards the EQA system. For instance, one interviewee from the HERQA conveys his own viewpoints in the following manner:

...the current EQA arrangement is a legally mandated and an externally instigated way of assuring quality, notably in degree-granting HEIs, public or private, throughout the country. In the course of assuring quality, the EQA system is trying to employ a variety of mechanisms and procedures without disfranchising the autonomy of HEIs and with no violation of the academic freedom of the working staff in those institutions that are under external quality surveillance (HD2, on the 2nd of August 2018).

In a similar vein, on his part, the interview respondent from the MoSHE adds his perspectives on the Ethiopian higher education EQA system that is currently in action in degree-granting public and private HEIs all over the country as follows:

...EQA in the Ethiopian higher education context can be labeled as an externally initiated one that is run by the independent agency –the HERQA and strived to assure and uphold the quality of education in public and private HEIs throughout the country (M1, on January 21, 2019).

In accordance with the views and positions of most of the interviewees from the HERQA and MoSHE, the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement is conceptualized as an externally

prompted quality regulating activity that is being materialized under the auspices of the HERQA without jeopardizing the institutional autonomy of the HEIs in the country. In actual fact, these viewpoints have some level of conformity and incongruity to the aforementioned collective assertions of the informants from private and public case study universities. In this regard, beyond the existing shared commonalities in conceptualizing the EQA system as an externally driven quality assurance endeavor, the way how it approaches public and private HEIs is appeared to be one of the major points of divergence among the informants from the private and public universities and the HERQA or the MoSHE.

Even globally, in the higher education context, due to several factors, the proper or universal conceptualization of EQA arrangements has become the hardest task to do. Nevertheless, Li (2011) enunciates that at present, there is a preeminent attempt to commonly label EQA systems in many parts of the world as a set of actions of an external body (perhaps an independent one and resides outside of HEIs), which may be a quality assurance agency or any other recognized body that are used to assess or evaluate the operations and/or the delivery of the academic programs of a given HEI to determine the status of the meeting of the agreed-upon or the predetermined quality standards and benchmarks mostly through accreditation, assessment, and audit. In this sense, the Ethiopian higher education EQA system ought to manifest itself having all these peculiar features to the HEIs and other stakeholders too.

With respect to the purpose, Strydom (as cited in Odera-Kwach, 2011) divulges that among the key intents of external/quality assurance, accountability (which is more comprehensive and somewhat summative in nature) and improvement (that mainly presupposes the use of formative modalities and mechanisms) have a preponderant place in the scene of higher education. However, the extent to which such intentions are realized, differ from nation to nation and from one institution to the other because external/quality assurance is rather a context-bounded activity. Therefore, on this basis, in this study, issues that are related to the overall intentions of the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement are also analyzed to understand the underlined purposes (and the intrinsic motives behind) of practicing EQA in case study public and private universities.

In this regard, first, to create a better understanding of the purposes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA scheme, it is important to see some of the legally granted powers and duties of the

HERQA (towards/on the public and private HEIs). For instance, as is outlined in the second Ethiopian higher education bill (during the EPRDF-led regime in the country) that is, proclamation number 650/2009, the HERQA shall have the powers and duties to:

...develop and implement clearly designed evaluation and accreditation criteria and procedures; evaluate the activities, relevance, and quality of education and training of any institution on the basis of which accreditation and renewal of accreditation shall be given; evaluate whether the relevance and quality enhancement system of institutions are capable of ensuring quality in higher education; ensure that higher education and training offered at any institution are in line with economic, social, and other relevant policies of the country; examine and decide on applications submitted to it for accreditation and renewal of accreditation in accordance with the provisions of this proclamation, and regulations, and directives to be issued for the implementation of this proclamation; request, when necessary, for information and opinions from appropriate organs to assess the relevance and quality of education or to examine accreditation or renewal of accreditation applications; evaluate institutions to ensure their compliance with the standards of relevance and quality of education set forth in this proclamation and regulations and directives to be issued for the implementation of this proclamation, and present to the ministry²⁸ conclusions resulting from the assessment; prepare and submit to the ministry requirements and directives for the determination of status of institutions; maintain up-to-date information on the accredited institutions and their status, main units, and specialties, and periodically disseminate the same to the public through appropriate means of communication (pp. 5039-5041).²⁹

The afore-described powers and duties that are vested to the HERQA show that the agency has an equal mandate and responsibility to improve and control the quality of and the provision of quality education in the HEIs throughout the country irrespective of their type and level of development. Hence, in accordance with the bill, the HERQA can carry out any kind of institutional and academic program external scrutiny in various forms and mechanisms to offer public assurances that the public or private HEIs deliver valuable or standard services to society.

Nonetheless, in practice, in realizing such prime intentions of the EQA system, there are some similarities and differences observed in public and private case universities. In relation to this, for example, one focus group discussant from the public university summarizes the key points that have been reflected by the group members as follows:

²⁸ The 'Ministry' herein refers to the formerly known MoE, now it has changed into –MoSHE.

²⁹ Source: FDRE (2009).

...the state and the HERQA seem to have a strong motive that EQA should serve for different purposes to public and private HEIs in the country. Perhaps this is because most of the degree-granting public universities are established under the protection of the federal government without being impeded by financial constraints, while private HEIs are joining the sector primarily for the sake of maximizing their own profits. In this context, there is a credence that quality especially in private institutions needs to be strictly regulated and controlled than public counterparts... Thus, the current EQA system has dual intentions in private institutions i.e., supervising/improving and controlling the quality, whereas in public institutions the purpose appears to be more of quality improvement because ‘መንግስት ቤቱን አይዘጋውም’ [meaning: the government does not shut down institutions which belong to it] (DAS1, on the 7th of October 2018).

Similar to the above general assertions, the other informants from case study private and public universities have uniformly considered quality improvement as one of the major intentions of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system. Mostly, this aim is being attained through the application of the viable external institutional quality audit approach in the respective institutions. In support of the viewpoints of the informants, Kassahun (2015) remarks that the present institution-based quality audit activity that takes place in public and private HEIs is mainly meant to provide support to the institutions establish and strengthen an IQA system so that they can improve the status of the quality of education they are offering to their clients or customers.

Even though quality shall be stepped up better through improvement or formative approaches than control (Harvey, 2008), quality improvement is not to be the only purpose of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system (as is shown in the consigned powers and duties to the HERQA, and) as it holds true elsewhere in the world. Rather, ensuring accountability or quality control is also believed to be the other intention of the existing EQA arrangement in its application to HEIs throughout the country.

However, the standpoints of most of the informants from the two case institutions inform that, especially, the quality control intention at present seemed to be realized in private than public HEIs. In favor of this, Ashcroft and Rayner (2010) state that the Ethiopian government has been utilized the external/quality assurance mechanism as a way of regulating a quickly intensifying and largely unfettered private market that has developed, as higher education is no longer exclusively owned by the state. In the same way, Essete (2009) also attests that the EQA system is known and interpreted in the Ethiopian context mainly as one way to control mainly the private HEIs.

In addition to this, there is a dominant perception existed among several of the informants from private case university that quality control is more pronounced than quality improvement in the institution. On the contrary, in response to this, one of the interviewees from the HERQA expresses his views in the following manner:

...the HERQA has a mandate to control, monitor, and foster the quality of educational programs and as a whole, the provision of quality education in public and private HEIs throughout the country... So, in principle, there is no way for the HERQA to be overemphasized on one of these objectives in its acts in public and private HEIs... However, due to the presence of a serious resource limitation, the HERQA is not yet in a position to materialize these intentions fully in public and even in private HEIs (HD2, on August 2, 2018).

Furthermore, in a similar notion of understanding with the interviewee from the HERQA, the respondent from the MoSHE reflects that:

After all, whether it is a private or public institution, all are working for the benefit of the nation and society. Therefore, basically, there is nothing that compels the HERQA to have a secretive motive towards private institutions... In fact, the implementation of the EQA system creates inconveniences here and there... But this should not totally disgrace the inherent intention of the EQA scheme (M1, on the 21st of January 2018).

The views of the informants from the HERQA and MoSHE have shown that at the moment, as per the vested legal powers and duties to it, the HERQA is working hard towards achieving the quality improvement and the quality control intentions virtually in all degree-granting HEIs throughout the country. Undeniably, they have also indicated that since the HERQA has been confronted with multifaceted resource and other challenges, it is currently unable to discharge the EQA service in its full packages, and in turn not be able to attain the desired outcomes in public and private HEIs in the country.

Overall, based on the existing discernible fact, it is possible to substantiate that ascertaining the balance between the two major intentions (i.e., quality improvement and quality control) has been still the hardest task for the HERQA/the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement in public and private HEIs in the country. Beyond debating on the issue of quality control and quality improvement, Hayward (2006) suggests that EQA systems especially in the context of African higher education ought to have a wide range of specific aims, which include: assessing and evaluating the performance of HEIs in line with teaching, learning, research, and other services; enhancing the quality of education via assisting HEIs in meeting/satisfying both the national and

the international standards and expectations; offering assurance to the public regarding the realization of the necessary, comprehensive level of quality parameters and the specific set of academic and professional standards or criteria; safeguarding the public from fraudulent or substandard education/service providers, for instance, by holding HEIs accountable to the public and other stakeholders; and appraising the importance and relevance of different academic and professional programs in HEIs. In this light, the Ethiopian EQA scheme also needs to broaden its services to attain a wide range of purposes in public and private HEIs in the country.

7.2. Examining the Implementation Practices of the EQA System

In this part, the comparative analysis and the analytic discussion are conducted focusing on two central sub-themes: the major EQA mechanisms and their implementation and implementation challenges of the major EQA approaches.

7.2.1. The Major EQA Mechanisms and their Implementation

At present, in Ethiopia, the higher education EQA system, among other things, is preoccupied with mechanisms like academic program accreditation and re-accreditation in private and external institutional quality audits in both public and private HEIs. Also, to a lesser extent, the rest of EQA approaches such as institutional accreditation in private and program-level audits in both private and public institutions are being carried out in the country. However, the emphasis in this research study is only placed on the previously mentioned two main EQA approaches or mechanisms that are currently in place in case study private and/or public universities.

Firstly, the institutional external quality audit is by now is equally in place in both public and private case institutions; as it is plainly described in one of the agency's documents –HERQA (2006a), it is:

As one of its key activities, HERQA will carry out institutional quality audits of all HEIs. An institutional quality audit is an in-depth analysis and assessment of the quality and relevance of programs and the teaching and learning environment. Equally importantly, it will assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of a HEI's approach to quality care, its systems of accountability, and its internal review mechanisms (p. 4).

Based on the above explanation, presently, the external institutional quality audit seems to have double roles. The first one is its aspiration to assure and enhance quality and relevance in the teaching and learning milieus of all HEIs (public and private) and the next one is its supervisory and guiding attempt towards the IQA initiatives and the accountability mechanisms of the same institutions throughout the country. In the same vein, Hayward (2006) reflects on the fact that a quality audit is an assessment of a given institution's quality assurance and regulation system through self-examination and external appraisal of its academic programs, staff, and infrastructure. Moreover, an audit process should offer an autonomous evaluation and assessment of an institution's system of accountability, IQA and review methods and approaches, and their effectiveness with an independent and external body or agency endorsing that the institution's quality assurance practice conforms to its standards or criteria, missions, and targeted goals (Hayward, 2006; UNESCO, 2010). This implies that there is virtually a similar way of coining the concept of quality audit in Ethiopia (by the HERQA) like many others do elsewhere in the world.

Concerning the critical emphasis and essential merits of external institutional quality audit, which is currently in effect in degree-granting public and private HEIs all over the country, HERQA (2006a) again remarks that:

...it is important to note that a HERQA institutional audit will consider inputs and processes as well as outcomes. Familiarity with the areas that will be the focus points for HERQA institutional quality audits will help HEIs to evaluate the relevance and quality of their activities and prepare for an institutional quality audit (p. 5).

Therefore, focusing on inputs, processes, and outputs/outcomes, the HERQA identifies the following ten major areas or aspects of operation for the institutional external quality audit process to be successfully undertaken in public and private HEIs in the country (similarly, this also fully works for case universities as well). They are:

vision, mission, and educational goals; governance and management system; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; student admission and support services; program relevance and curriculum; teaching, learning, and assessment; student progression and graduate outcomes; research and outreach activities; and IQA (HERQA, 2006a, 2006b, 20011a; Tesfaye, 2015).

These critical elements or focus areas and their respective descriptors (of the quality audit approach) are identical across the board and applicable in the same way irrespective of the types, the levels of development, or any other differences of the HEIs throughout the country.

Furthermore, in the course of carrying out the external institutional quality audit, the HERQA has also adopted and developed a set of similar steps and procedures, which are applied for all degree-granting public and private HEIs in the country (obviously, this is also fully applicable to case institutions too). Some of the key steps and procedures involved in the quality audit process are:

HEI carries out an institutional self-evaluation and prepares a SED; HEI sends HERQA its SED and informs HERQA of their wish to have an institutional quality audit; HERQA and HEI agree a date for the quality audit; HERQA establishes a quality audit team in consultation with the HEI; HERQA institutional quality auditors make a one-day briefing visit to the HEI; HERQA quality audit team makes a four-day institutional quality audit visit to the HEI; HERQA issues a quality audit report; HEI prepares an action plan to enhance quality and relevance (HERQA, 2006b, p. 4).

Similarly, a closer look at the standpoints of the informants indicates that the external institutional quality audit is being taken place in both case institutions voluntarily (i.e., based upon the consensus or mutual consents between the institutions and the HERQA) having a four-phased tactic that embraces: self-evaluation or self-assessment (by the HEIs themselves), peer review or site visit (by quality audit team members that is composed of persons from different HEIs and the HERQA as well), reporting and publication of the quality audit results, and lastly, conducting a continuous follow-up to assess and evaluate the status of implementation of the possible recommendations that are stipulated in the final quality audit report and to see the impacts of the quality audit in the institutions. At the same time, to redress the complaints of the institutions, the HERQA has also already developed an appeal system.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are identical ways (steps and procedures) of undertaking external institutional quality audit in case study private and public universities, the two institutions have not yet been audited for an equal number of times. As is indicated in the 351/2003 proclamation, the HERQA wishes to conduct a quality audit in all degree-granting HEIs at least in every five years interval³⁰. Nevertheless, to date, in private case university, a quality audit has

³⁰ About the time of carrying out institutional external quality audit, the Ethiopian higher education proclamation number 351/2003 reveals that the HERQA needs to evaluate all degree-granting HEIs in the country at least once

been taken place only twice i.e., in 2004 and 2008. Also, in the course of carrying out this research project, the university is on the way to host the third round of quality audit (actually, it is about ten or eleven years after the second quality audit has been held in the institution). Astoundingly, in public case university, a quality audit has so far been conducted only at once, that is, by the year 2012. Till now, there has been no attempt in the university to host the second round quality audit (even more than seven years after the first audit has taken place in the institution).

On one hand, this observable circumstance may perhaps show the tendency of the HERQA to undertake external institutional quality audits more frequently in the private university than the public counterpart. On the other hand, as a trend, since a quality audit is being conducted on a voluntary basis and mutual agreements of an auditee HEI and the HERQA, its recurrent implementation in private case university (relatively as compared to the public one) may also indicate the responsiveness of the institution towards the external quality-assuring approaches and modalities than the public university.

Secondly, in the case of academic program accreditation and re-accreditation, currently, they are being implemented only in degree-granting private HEIs throughout the country (including private case university). In the milieu of Ethiopian higher education, program accreditation refers to “the evaluation of higher education academic programs in accordance with the HERQA’s accreditation standards that are stipulated as the minimum requirements to run the programs” (Tesfaye, 2016, p. 179). The meaning herein attaches to the program accreditation by the HERQA in the Ethiopian context endorses what others have been forwarded about the term in the field (e.g., Harvey, 2008; Harvey & Mason, 1995; Hayward, 2006; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007).

At present, in Ethiopia, “as per the higher education bill 650/2009 there is no pre-accreditation but accreditation and re-accreditation of programs” (Tesfaye, 2015, p. 46). Thus, pertaining to the essential requirements of the current academic program accreditation (and re-accreditation) practices, the Ethiopian higher education proclamation (650/2009) briefly states the following important points:

Any person who desires to establish, upgrade, or modify a private institution shall be required to secure accreditation from the ministry³¹ in accordance with this proclamation. Any institution, which has received accreditation and offers accredited study programs, shall have the right to issue valid qualifications of higher education to its graduates consistent with accredited study programs, specific disciplines in the programs, and its enrolment capacity (FDRE, 2009, p. 5031).

As to the above declaration, the MoE (now the MoSHE) seems to have the ultimate power to grant a program accreditation license (than the HERQA) for private HEIs in the country. However, the applications of private institutions for program accreditations first need to be directly submitted to the HERQA instead of the MoE. This is portrayed in the same bill as “any person who desires to establish, upgrade or modify a private institution shall apply for accreditation to the agency³²” (FDRE, 2009, p. 5031). According to the same proclamation, after an accreditation license is once issued to a given academic program, it will be valid for the consecutive three years.

Upon the expiry of the first three years of accreditation time, a private HEI is still expected to renew its accreditation license (FDRE, 2009). But after the re-accreditation license is secured, the relicensed academic program will be legitimate in the institution for the succeeding five years without passing through any other form of formal accreditation (FDRE, 2009). Nonetheless, this has no application at all for regular, undergraduate programs in public HEIs (including public case institution) in the country.

Moreover, in viewpoints of several of the informants at case study private university and the HERQA, accreditation and re-accreditation (unlike external institutional quality audit) are highly working for the fulfillment of input than process and output standards. In doing so, generally, the accreditation and re-accreditation approaches involve some specific, critical stages: application for accreditation/reaccreditation³³ and submission of the indispensable documents by the institution to the HERQA³⁴; evaluation of the application and other documents by the HERQA; conducting site visits by experts or professional assessors in the institution and compiling the report that embraces

³¹ The term ‘Ministry’ at that time represents the MoE, but now it refers to the newly established –MoSHE.

³² The Agency in this context refers to the HERQA.

³³ According to HERQA (2016), after the HEI has finished its preparation and made sure for the fulfillment of the requirements, it can apply for accreditation both by writing a request letter as well as filling in the application form provided by the agency/HERQA up on request. (p.1)

³⁴ The accreditation and re-accreditation application checklist consists of the following six major sections: background information; legal and system documents; program curriculum and course modules; program facilities; academic and administrative staff; and report (only for re-accreditation applications) (HERQA, 2016).

the assessors' professional judgments (based upon the criteria that are listed down in the checklists of the assessors/evaluators) to be submitted to the HERQA; giving recommendations either on the disavowal or grant of the issuance of accreditation/reaccreditation by the HERQA; and in the end, waiting for the eventual decisions of the MoE (now it is the MoSHE) either to grant or revoke the accreditation/reaccreditation licenses.

Nevertheless, recently, a new trend has been installed to ultimately award the accreditation and re-accreditation licenses of educational programs in private HEIs by the director-general of the HERQA himself/herself. This works, if there is no decision of disavowal of the accreditation or re-accreditation licenses of a given program by the HERQA's director-general. If not, still it is up to the final verdict and decision of the MoSHE. At the same time, to entertain the complaints of private HEIs, there is an appeal system. With regard to it, one of the HERQA's institutional documents highlights that:

...an appeal system has been established since 2006 so that private HEIs can appeal whenever they feel they have anything to complain about the course of the accreditation processes... If an institution believes that an unfair decision has been made, it can lodge its complaint to the director-general³⁵. Consequently, he/she discusses the matter with accreditation experts and then will come to the final decision. If the decision is not acceptable to the private HEI then independent arbitration is provided by a committee reporting to the MoE³⁶ (HERQA, 2011b, p. 79-80).

In this way, the existing appeal system opens up space for private HEIs to redress the grievances, they might have sensed in the course of the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation processes.

In conclusion, from the above points, it is possible to grasp that at present, accreditation and re-accreditation are being exclusively in action in private HEIs in Ethiopia. While public institutions have not yet been viably subjected to be accredited or re-accredited in any form by the HERQA. Perhaps this circumstance obliges one to raise several critical questions on the actual implementation patterns of the EQA system in public and private HEIs in the country.

³⁵ This is to mean that the director general of the HERQA.

³⁶ Presently, an independent arbitration committee reports to the MoSHE.

7.2.2. Implementation Challenges of the Major EQA Approaches

In this part, the comparative analysis and the analytic discussion are carried out concentrating on two major aspects i.e., non-university-specific (external) and university-specific (internal) challenges. Under each category, there are some protuberant implementation challenges (that are situated in the leading constructs of the conceptual framework of the study³⁷) of the external institutional quality audit and/or the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms to be analyzed particularly in the contexts of public and private case study universities. However, the order of analysis of the individual challenges under each theme does not necessarily have a direct alignment with the level of severity of the hindrances in the institutions.

7.2.2.1. Non-University-Specific Challenges

The first critical challenge that adversely affects the implementation of the major EQA approaches in public and private case institutions is raised in relation to the existing nationally prevailing legal issues. The legal setbacks in this regard, tend to have a lot of manifestations.

The first manifestation has been particularly raised in connection with some legal provisions that dwell, for instance, in the Ethiopian higher education proclamations i.e., 351/2003 and 650/2009 and declare the types of the main EQA mechanisms that are expected to be employed in degree-granting public and private HEIs throughout the country.

It is a known fact that the 351/2003 proclamation has created the legal basis for the emergence of the private education sector and paved the way for the proper functioning of private HEIs in the country as a whole. Next to the 351/2003 bill, in the amended 650/2009 proclamation, there are also some new notions included about the overall quality maintaining and regulating issues of public and private HEIs in the country. In this respect, for example, Wondwosen (2012) points out that the 650/2009 proclamation urges for “...the need for an internal quality enhancement scheme that needs to be set up at all HEIs” (p. 42). These and other several issues can be put forward as some of the achievements of the proclamations.

³⁷ See Chapter Three.

Nevertheless, the same proclamations still seem to espouse the dichotomization between public and private HEIs in the country. For instance, the 351/2003³⁸ and the 650/2009³⁹ bills have made accreditation compulsory for private HEIs. Neither of the proclamations explicitly deal with the accreditation issue in connection with public HEIs. Thus, from such a snap overview of the 351/2003 and the 650/2009 proclamations, it is possible to draw out that accreditation, be it an institution or academic program-based, is duly associated with private HEIs than their public counterparts in the country. This policy initiative in the ambit of Ethiopian higher education even appears to be a bit contradictory to the contexts of some African countries. In line with this, Wondwosen (2018a) affirms the fact that “holding both private and public providers of higher education accountable through quality assurance frameworks like accreditation is a policy track pursued by many governments, including those in Africa” (p. 2).

Following such implicit and explicit ‘legal biases or partialities’, at present, the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation approaches are taking place only in private HEIs. All educational programs of private institutions ought to fulfill the HERQA’s arduous accreditation and re-accreditation criteria or standards, and the HERQA has a mandate to the extent of closing down the institutions and annulling their licenses in terms of some educational programs. This makes the opening and the relaunching process of the academic programs the hardest task of the private university and in turn leads the institution not to be able to open and diversify its educational programs as needed. However, public HEIs are not expected to apply to the HERQA for the program (and institutional) accreditation and re-accreditation. There is no any explicit way by which the HERQA can ensure the educational programs in those institutions are meeting the needed standards. This creates an implementation gap in public case institution.

This discrepancy or ‘double standard’ has seemed to create grievances particularly among most of the informants at private case university. In relation to this, they have thought as if their institution is being treated unfairly, and eventually, this resulted in the decline of the worth of the implementation of the EQA mechanisms in the university.

³⁸ For example, in article number sixty-one and other similar articles.

³⁹ For instance, in article number seventy-four and other related articles.

On the contrary, concerning the ‘double standard’ or the dichotomous treatment of private HEIs at variance with public institutions, some of the interview respondents from the HERQA have underlined that even though the proclamations⁴⁰ do not unequivocally declare the accreditations of public HEIs, they have granted more or less equal powers and duties to the HERQA to conduct a quality assurance in all forms, in all institutions across the country. Hence, they tend to believe that somewhat it is also up to the incapability or incapacity of the HERQA up till now not to be able to undertake accreditations in degree-granting public HEIs in the country. In favor of this, the interviewee from the MoSHE has reflected his standpoints in the following quote:

I do not think that there is a policy-based double standard that is meant intentionally to treat differently public and private HEIs in Ethiopia. In fact, the implementation of the EQA approaches may give us this kind of wrong intonation and picture... But this emanates from the current capacity related restraints of the HERQA... At the moment, the government has been aggressively working to scale up the capacity of the HERQA and even to further amend the higher education bills... This may address the problem (M1, on January 21, 2019).

With regard to the manipulation of accreditation and re-accreditation in public HEIs in Africa, Hayward (2006) notes that public institutions (and the states) have often resisted the implementation of the national accreditation approaches in many African countries arguing that the process ought to be restricted to private HEIs. These public HEIs are, most of the time, considered themselves as accredited or licensed by the government, meaning they are accredited or licensed de jure – by virtue of being state-sponsored or owned by the government (Hayward, 2006). The situation in Africa also appears to better illuminate the prevailing inherent tendencies and perceptions in accreditation among most of the informants from the HERQA, the MoSHE, and the public institution.

Based on this fact, as the relationship between the HERQA and public HEIs is generally very weak, the full-scale implementation of the EQA approaches may also be at risk in public institutions in Ethiopia (though in these institutions the quality and the provision of quality education is still believed to be rapidly deteriorating). At this point, Tesfaye (2016), by considering the current objective realities in the Ethiopian higher education context, suggests that “all programs offered in all HEIs, be it public or private, should undergo a rigorous accreditation

⁴⁰ The 351/2003 and the 650/2009 Ethiopian higher education proclamations

process” (p. 185). Furthermore, to settle this, Hayward (2006) toughly recommends that external/quality assurance in higher education, if it is to be successful, legitimate, and as per in the general public interest, ought to embrace and treat equally both public and private HEIs. Adoption of such a trend may boost the implementation status of the EQA system in case study public and private universities as a whole.

The second manifestation of the legal challenges of implementing the major EQA mechanisms in selected public and private universities has been raised in relation to the professional autonomy and credibility of the HERQA itself. By the 351/2003 Ethiopian higher education proclamation, the HERQA is established as an autonomous agency that is primarily responsible for guiding and regulating the quality of the HEIs or the higher education sector in Ethiopia (HERQA, 2006e, 2014). In the same bill, it is also undoubtedly indicated that the HERQA shall be accountable to the MoE⁴¹ (MoE, 2003). In the same way, this is again implied in the Ethiopian higher education proclamation number 650/2009.⁴²

Based on the provisions in these bills, the HERQA has been organized as one of the functional units/wings in the then MoE (see it in Appendix F, 2), now it is in the MoSHE. This circumstance has pushed especially several of the informants in two case study universities to pose questions on the HERQA’s real autonomy (as the MoE/MoSHE has the right to steer the HERQA the way it likes) and the credibility of its decisions in public and private HEIs in the country (since most of the public degree-granting HEIs and the HERQA are currently resided under the same ministry i.e., the MoSHE). Due to the presence of such legal loopholes, the HERQA is not perceived to be in a position to equally and professionally enforce the EQA system (approaches) in the public and private institutions.

In this regard, particularly most of the informants from private case university have boldly put forward that owing to the crippled autonomy it has, now the HERQA does not seem to have full confidence to take strict measures or actions against public HEIs (as it has been doing for private institutions). This has resulted in the HERQA being highly mistrusted among the members of private HEIs. Similarly, several of the informants from public case study university have uttered

⁴¹ Currently, the HERQA’s accountability is to the newly founded Ministry that is, the MoSHE.

⁴² And in the council of ministers regulation number 261/2012 (FDRE, 2012, p. 6296).

that the HERQA, due to its inherent challenges of autonomy and credibility, has not yet been fully and effectively serving to scaffold the quality and the quality education provision in public HEIs as well. Therefore, the cumulative effect has been holding back the implementation of the EQA system in both case institutions (though the degree differs from one institution to the other).

At this point, apart from the viewpoints of the informants from the two universities, the interview respondents from the HERQA and the MoSHE have shown somewhat a divergent position. For instance, the interviewee in the MoSHE asserts that the HERQA's operational full independence is legally ratified and there is no way to refute this by the government or by the MoSHE. Nonetheless, still, the same respondent enunciates that he is personally comfortable if there is a new organizational structure to be launched to the HERQA and the HERQA's accountability transferred either to the head of the executive organ of the country (i.e., to the prime minister) or to the country's main legislative body (i.e., to the house of people's representatives). For him, this may perhaps avoid some unnecessary confusion and in turn, may enhance the credibility of the HERQA.

Indeed, even though the second Ethiopian higher education proclamation (650/2009) attempts to grant relatively better independence and institutional autonomy to the HERQA than the former one (351/2003), to date, the HERQA has been functioning under the MoSHE and its direct accountability continuing to be for the ministry. This may not alleviate the existing controversies on the autonomy and credibility issues of the HERQA once and for all. Instead, beyond its domestic damages, Abebaw and Aster (2012) argue that it can be a barrier for Ethiopian HEIs to obtain recognition by the international quality-assuring bodies as they have not yet been quality accredited or assured by fully autonomous and independent quality assurance agency. Hence, in general, this may need the immediate and careful interventions of the concerned parties such as the government/the MoSHE.

Next to the legal coercing issues, several of the informants in this research study have raised the other non-university-specific challenge in relation to the current incapacity and incapability of the HERQA to render essential professional and other support services to the public and private institutions. In this respect, for instance, one of the interviewees from the HERQA discloses his views as follows:

...the HERQA has a lot of problems. Among others, the problems may emanate from: the persisting old and untimely organizational structure; the prevailing financial, material, and human resource constraints; etc... Consequently, the HERQA is not able to discharge its responsibilities in terms of capacitating public and private HEIs in the country, and this in turn negatively affects the implementation of the key EQA approaches in those institutions. Indeed, the HERQA is now on the way to launch a new platform based upon the findings of the studies that are conducted and meant to transform the capacity and capability of the agency. I hope this solves the problem at least to a certain extent (HD2, on August 2, 2018).

This can be verified by juxtaposing the powers and duties that are bestowed to the HERQA against the objective realities on the ground. For example, in the 650/2009 Ethiopian higher education proclamation, under article eighty-nine, there are about fifteen different, giant powers and duties that are vested to the HERQA⁴³. In the course of carrying out this study, the HERQA has only two major operational directorates: the quality audit and enhancement directorate and the accreditation, equivalence, and authentication of educational credentials directorate (see Figure 5.3). The first directorate is primarily awaited for undertaking external institutional quality audit and academic program audits virtually in all public and private degree-granting HEIs throughout the country. While the second directorate is used to perform tasks mostly in private and in some cases in public institutions and others as well, in relation to the academic program and institutional accreditations and equivalence and authentication or authorization of educational credentials. However, the directorates are understaffed and in acute financial⁴⁴, material, and technological resources restraints. Additionally, the HERQA is still totally cramped at one center (i.e., the central headquarter of the agency –Addis Ababa⁴⁵). This by any means does not go in line with the rapidly expanding higher education sector in the country.

A critical look at the views of the informants in the study avows that as a corollary to the substantial lack of capacity of the HERQA to enforce rules and regulations, the proper implementation of the major EQA approaches in the public and private institutions has been adversely affected (though the degree varies between the two universities), and this in turn

⁴³ The powers and duties of the HERQA are outlined, for example, in the Ethiopian higher education bill number 650/2009, from page number 5039-5041.

⁴⁴ As the council of ministers regulation number 261/2012 states, "...the financial budget of the HERQA shall be allocated by the government" (FDRE, 2012, p. 6298). In actual fact, the HERQA's extreme dependence on the limited financial budget of the government creates and exacerbates panic in the day-to-day operational activities of the agency itself.

⁴⁵ Until now, the HERQA has no any branch in different regional states or city administrations that exist throughout the country.

contributed to the persistence of the so-called 'double standard' in the implementation patterns of the EQA system in those institutions. So, there is a need to beef up the current status of the HERQA, with a synergetic intervention of the concerned parties.

Besides the aforementioned most critical issues, other external implementation challenges have been raised by the informants in this research study. Among these challenges, the analysis and discussion are conducted consecutively in relation to the following two major aspects: the absence of relevance and clarity of the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation criteria or standards (and the nonexistence of well-articulated national quality assurance policy framework in the country) and the presence of inadequate involvement or contributions of (members of) different professional agencies/associations, employers' unions, and other relevant external bodies in the course of implementation of the EQA approaches.

In respect to the first issue, there has been a lot of concerns raised especially by the informants at the public and private universities. For example, several of the informants from private case institution have uncovered that some of the accreditation and re-accreditation criteria are not relevant to the real context of the institution or the nature of the specific program to be accredited; and even sometimes, they do not consider the level of development of the private sector in the country. It is simply in favor of the 'one size fits all' approach, which does not always work. In line with this, Harvey (2002a) stresses that the real context and the level of development of the territory education sector as key variables, need to be taken into serious consideration while making use of various accreditation standards and criteria in a given HEI.

In addition to this, a closer look at the views of most of the informants from the private university indicates that the accreditation and re-accreditation criteria are mostly input-based (without taking care of the process and output aspects), and somewhat, due to their ambiguous nature, they are liable to the subjective interpretations of the external assessors. As a corollary, the informants tend to believe that the program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms are not presently in a

better status of implementation in their institution, and in turn, the university is also not able to reap their better fruits⁴⁶.

Similarly, several of the informants from the two universities have shown their reservations in connection with the relevance and clarity of (some of) the criteria or standards of the institutional external quality audit approach. In this regard, they uniformly affirm that the existing ten focus areas (yardsticks) in the quality audit mechanism do not give equal attention and consideration for the three core missions of the HEIs like teaching-learning, research, and community services. Instead, greater emphasis is being placed on the teaching and learning processes. As a result of this disproportionate emphasis, the quality maintaining and assurance efforts towards the rest of the core activities are weakened in the institutions.

Furthermore, those informants have remarked that sometimes the reference points and the indicative sources of information (under each focus area) lack clarity. Owing to this reason, they have still declared that the proper attainment of the goals of quality audit under the major foci areas is being largely hampered in the institutions.

On their part, most of the interviewees from the HERQA have agreed that some of the criteria or standards in external institutional quality audit and academic program accreditation and re-accreditation need to be revisited and reconfigured to comply with the objective realities of the HEIs and the nature of the specific academic program needs to be licensed or relicensed. Nevertheless, they still try to assert that it is not a matter of choice sometimes to urge institutions to comply with or to meet some supra-level standards via external quality-assuring mechanisms. This is because higher education in its very nature is international, and the academic programs in HEIs need to be standardized and should enable the learners competent in the world of work even in the global arena. Eventually, this appears as an overwhelming perspective in the study, as far as the criteria or standards of the major EQA approaches are concerned.

On top of that, a critical look at most of the informants' viewpoints in this study discloses that the absence of a national stringent and well-articulated quality assurance policy framework that can

⁴⁶ A snap overview of the HERQA's 'accreditation and re-accreditation application checklist of 2016' can easily substantiate this fact, since its major sections (i.e., background information, legal and system documents, program curriculum and course modules, program facilities, academic and administrative staff, etc.) place emphasis purely on input aspects.

strictly guide both the outdoor and indoor quality assurance endeavors in the country adversely affects the implementation of the EQA system in public and private HEIs. Because this has often resulted in the quality enhancement and assurance initiatives and efforts to be fragmentarily and arbitrarily (haphazardly) carried out in public and private HEIs and ultimately, they used to be less worthwhile to bring the transformative change that is required in terms of embedding a strong quality culture in respective institutions. Hence, above all, such critical flaws need the speedy interventions of the government/the MoSHE, the HERQA, and other concerned bodies.

As is already indicated, the other external challenge has been raised in relation to the involvement or contributions of (representatives of) various professional associations, employment agencies, and other external bodies in the course of implementation of the EQA system (approaches) in case study public and private universities. In connection with this, UNESCO (2006) underlines that as “professional bodies tend to focus on professional standards and skills related to the professions that students are trained for, any methodology for EQA must balance the different interests of stakeholders” (p. 16). Correspondingly, Harman (2011) states that professional bodies in the quality assurance process often work to achieve sets of common national standards for professional recognition and to facilitate the employment of graduates in the world of work.

In Africa, as Materu (2007) reveals, even if it is so limited, but still, there are some countries in the continent, which try to invite professional associations and other external bodies to be involved in different quality assurance and related activities (for example, in Nigeria and South Africa in the accreditation of professional and academic study programs; in Nigeria, Tanzania, and Ghana in accreditation teams/panels arrangement; and in Nigeria and Tanzania in curriculum review and evaluation deeds; etc.).

Likewise, recognizing the merits, several of the informants in this study have avowed that the adequate involvement of external bodies (such as professional expert groups, subject specialists, employers, and others) can vastly boost the worth of the external/quality assurance process, and this in turn improves the quality and the provision of quality education in HEIs in the country. However, unlike those few countries in Africa, their participation and contributions in the EQA process in Ethiopia appear to be unsatisfactory (though there is a good start of participating them in developing accreditations and quality improvement standards especially for health-related

programs in HEIs). In favor of this, for example, one of the interview respondents from the HERQA reflects his viewpoints in the following quote:

The HERQA properly understands the strategic role of professionals/their associations in the EQA process. Nevertheless, the lack of a strong legal basis and the absence of eligible professional agencies in various disciplines (except some in health education like medicine, public health, pharmacy, nursing, etc.), in tandem with the current inability of the HERQA to mobilize the necessary resources, have deterred their involvement and contributions in the EQA process. In fact, by now, the government and the HERQA are working hard to come up with new legal provisions and platforms that would overcome such bottlenecks (HD1, on the 22nd of January 2019).

Materu (2007) goes on to remark on the fact that “the key strength of professional associations is that their legal mandates include licensing of graduates to practice after graduation. This serves as a deterrent that compels tertiary institutions to voluntarily open up their programs for professional accreditation” (p. 36). Nonetheless, with respect to inviting and involving external bodies in the EQA process, a closer look at the results of the reviews of documents in the study shows that neither of the Ethiopian higher education proclamations, that is, 351/2003 and 650/2009 have made any explicit and viable statement. As a result, there are no suitable mechanisms in place to amass valuable inputs from the alumni and other graduates, employers, etc. Among other things, this seems to more exacerbate the situation.

Following this, it is believed that the implementation of the major EQA mechanisms in the public and private HEIs has been seriously affected (in practice, as it limits a range of best experiences that is nurtured by the EQA system and its approaches), and this in turn erodes the credibility and the authenticity of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system as a whole (because as Darajat (2013) asserts, professional bodies are quite accountable to different stakeholders to prove the credibility of the quality assurance process and to ensure the objectivity and transparency of the decisions or recommendations in it). Therefore, like other external implementation setbacks, this may also need some possible interventions of different concerned parties.

In general, because the external or non-university-specific challenges dwell at the macro-level (institutional environment)⁴⁷, they are expected to impact the process of implementation of the EQA system (approaches) in private and public HEIs throughout the country (though the degree

⁴⁷ See the descriptions for the ‘external environment’ in the conceptual framework of the study.

varies from one institution to the other). Of the key external forces, as this study has uncovered, the coercive actions and procedures such as legislative and administrative laws and regulations, pressures, requirements, and expectations (at the national level) rather than the mimetic and normative ones are found to be the prime instruments by which the government (HERQA) tries to steer EQA in private and public case institutions. Thus, at this stage, it is important to remind all the concerned bodies that unless these and other external restraining issues are given the necessary due attention and the proper remediation (solution) is deliberated at the national level, the implementation of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system may not be accomplishing all its targets up to the required levels.

7.2.2.2. University-Specific Challenges

Besides the external challenges, some university-specific or internal issues are encumbering the implementation of the major EQA mechanisms in case study public and private institutions.

To start with the first issue, it is known that for the successful achievement of any kind of activity in a given organization, the role of institutional leaders/managers is so crucial. Perhaps this is because leaders can: inspire, direct, and influence other workers with great initiation and passion; create a shared vision and understanding; and mobilize the required (human, material, and financial) resources for the optimal success of the key organizational goals (Nguyen, 2016; Salter, 2002). So, it is my strong belief that such institutional leaders' roles should have been existed to effectively materialize the EQA approaches in public and private case institutions. However, in this regard, several of the informants in the study have raised a lot of complaints and considered this as one of the internal implementation challenges of the EQA system in case study universities.

In line with this, first of all, concerning the general scenario, most of the interviewees from the HERQA reveal that even if conducting the EQA system in public and private HEIs in the country is primarily the mandate and the responsibility of the HERQA, the active involvement of those institutions are equally indispensable in the process. Such institutional feedbacks are required to be prompted under the auspices of particularly the senior leaders in the HEIs. However, a critical look at the views of those respondents indicates that a significant number of HEIs' leaders or managers in the country are not well-informed about the overall intentions and spirits of the EQA system so that their response towards the system and their ability in initiating and mobilizing

resources in the implementation process of the major EQA mechanisms in their respective institutions is so minimal and inadequate. As a corollary, the implementation of the EQA system has been deteriorating in many public and private HEIs in the country.

Similarly, as most of the informants from public and private case universities have unvaryingly confessed, because of their own peculiar technical or institutional realities, the leaders' devotion and engagement in the course of implementation of the key EQA approaches in their respective institutions are unsatisfactory. In this respect, for instance, in public case university, most of the time, the leaders do not pay due attention to the EQA system, which is initiated and operated by another government-owned agency –the HERQA (i.e., accountable to the same ministry⁴⁸ as that of the university itself). On its part, the private case university, as it is entirely dependent on the tuition and fees of the students, mostly the leaders spend their time in handling such customer or business-related matters or routines than aggressively working on the quality bottlenecks and retorting to the fundamental requirements of the major EQA mechanisms, which are currently in place in the institution. Nonetheless, as private case university has often been pressured by the HERQA in different ways (than the public counterpart), relatively, better leadership commitment and devotion are evident in the institution.

Leaders in HEIs are also demanded to play a profound role to establish a robust and vibrant organizational quality culture. This is because the assurance of the provision of quality education is not going to be materialized on the vacant spaces, with the help of deep-rooted beliefs, assumptions or convictions, and values of a given organization and its members (i.e., an organizational quality culture) instead (Denison, 1996; Harvey, 2009a; Loukkola & Zang, 2010). Equally important, the establishment of strong institutional quality culture can facilitate and augment the proper implementation of the EQA system (approaches) in case study public and private universities. Nevertheless, the leaders in both institutions are similarly grumbled by several of the informants owing to the little emphasis and attention they have been granting to the embedment of a sturdy organizational quality culture, where everyone is responsible and accountable in the process of maintaining and boosting quality in the universities. Because in practice, quality culture has drifted towards meaning how a unit adapts to quality assurance, that is, the development of, and compliance with, processes of quality assurance endeavors in a HEI

⁴⁸ At present, both of the HERQA and the DU are accountable to the same ministry i.e., the MoSHE.

(Harvey, 2009b). These have cumulatively resulted in the weakening of the effectiveness of the EQA system in case institutions. Therefore, the universities need to bridge such critical gaps in collaboration with the MoSHE, the HERQA, and other stakeholders.

The second major university-specific challenge has been raised by most of the informants in the study in relation to the academic and other staff members' limited awareness of the EQA system, and in connection with their inadequate involvement in the course of implementation of the key EQA approaches in their respective institutions. For Harvey and Green (1993), besides the leaders, academics, notably teachers and researchers, and other administrative and auxiliary personnel (and even students) are required to be well-versed on the indoor and outdoor quality assurance systems; and they should take an active part in their implementation in HEIs. Understandably, their better awareness and active involvement can step up the effectiveness of those quality assurance systems in a given HEI.

In line with this, several of the informants from public and private case universities have confirmed that (though the degree differs) the academic staff (teachers and researchers) and other community members have a very limited understanding of quality or various quality upholding techniques or modalities and a lower sense of ownership in the quality assurance systems that are in action in the institutions. Even their involvement in the implementation of the quality assurance systems is still believed to be inadequate (due to miscellaneous contextual and institutional factors). Following this, there is a consensus that the implementation of the EQA system has been inauspiciously affected in the universities.

In addition, in this connection, a closer look at the standpoints of the respondents from the HERQA affirms what has already been revealed by the informants in the two universities. So, the necessary attention needs to be paid at national and institutional levels to curb the situation. Because as Teferra (as cited in Yohannes, 2014) enunciates, “without a fully engaged and enthused academic community, building academic excellence, a strong culture of scholarship, and professional commitment may remain elusive” (p. 3) in HEIs as a whole.

The third and perhaps the last university-specific challenge has been raised in this study in connection with the presence of limited financial, material, and skilled human resources in both case institutions. As is well-known, the ready availability and the proper deployment of essential

resources are quite crucial to effectively execute any activity in a certain institution. Like others, implementation of the EQA system (approaches) presupposes such preconditions. However, particularly in private case university, there is serious resource scarcity and this has been adversely affecting the quality assurance endeavors in the institution.

In this regard, evidence from the reviewed documents and the informants in private case university expound that even though there are some legal bases⁴⁹, up till now, no practical trend to financially or other resource-wise support the private HEIs by the government or any other non-government organization in Ethiopia. As a consequence, private case study institution is forced to be entirely dependent on the collected tuition and fees of its students. This, in itself, is not sufficient enough to cover the miscellaneous academic and other administrative expenses of the institution. Under such circumstances, the university is somewhat dispirited to: work harder to excel equally in all the core missions of HEIs (i.e., teaching-learning, research, and community services); hire adequate qualified, full-time academic staff in different fields of specializations; and fulfill the necessary infrastructures (e.g., smart classrooms, libraries, laboratories, ICT centers, etc.) of good standards. These things have a direct or indirect association with the effective implementation of the EQA system in the institution.

In favor of this, Wondwosen and Getnet (2014) note that private HEIs in the country have widely emerged since only a few years back⁵⁰ so that up till now most of them have not yet developed and launched diversified income and revenue generation mechanisms and systems. This circumstance leads private institutions to be afflicted with serious financial (human, material, etc.) resource challenges, and in turn deters their capability to thrive and to discharge the expected roles and activities (Wondwosen, 2018b; Wondwosen & Getnet, 2014). Although it appears as one of the critical internal challenges of the private university, it is hardly possible to say that the public counterpart is also free from such resource restraints.

In this respect, most of the informants at the public university applaud that especially the shortage of skilled and qualified human power (who can properly initiate, facilitate, and monitor the quality

⁴⁹ The EETP (1994) and the Ethiopian higher education proclamations (i.e., 351/2003 and 650/2009) have a lot of provisions that make possible the support to be provided to the private higher education sector/private HEIs in Ethiopia.

⁵⁰ The promulgation of the 351/2003 Ethiopian higher education proclamation has legally granted the room for the mushrooming of the private HEIs in Ethiopia.

protection and assurance activities till the last educational units or departments) has been harshly affecting the implementation of the quality assurance systems, be it internal or external, in the institution. As well-trained human resource is everything, when the university is able to secure skilled and professional staff, it can effectively manage and efficiently utilize the other resources as well.

In the end, the individual case study universities, along with other concerned parties, need to look for better, suitable ways to overcome such resource limitations. This may possibly heighten the actual practices of EQA in the institutions.

Generally, the issues that are portrayed above are considered as some of the main university-specific setbacks of implementing the EQA system (approaches) in public and private case institutions. Even if those challenges have their own internal and/or external grounds to be manifested, they are mostly confined to (the task or technical environment⁵¹ of) the respective institutions. Thus, there might be multifaceted mechanisms to tackle these and other similar challenges, and thereby to transform the status of quality and provision of quality education in each of the case universities.

7.3. Scrutinizing the Outcomes of the EQA System

Under this part, the comparative analysis and the analytic discussion are carried out in regard to the practical and/or potential perceived outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, particularly in the milieus of the two case study universities.

To start with, most obviously, dealing with the outcome of an EQA system does not seem to be the simplest task in the ambit of HEIs. In this light, Wondwosen (2012) unequivocally remarks that it is not that easy to exactly uncover the impacts of certain activities in HEIs since there is an opportunity for a certain outcome to be the cumulative effects of manifold attributing factors and processes. In this complex situation, however, mainly based on the critical look at the stances of the informants, the study has endeavored to indicate at least some of the practical and potential positive and undesired outcomes of the EQA system, particularly concentrating in public and private case institutions.

⁵¹ See the explanations for ‘internal environment/university characteristics’ in chapter three.

Concerning the positive outcomes of the EQA system in public and private HEIs in the country in general, for example, one of the interview respondents from the HERQA opines that:

...the commencement of EQA in HEIs (public and private) in Ethiopia has brought a lot of benefits such as the increment of the awareness of the communities in HEIs on quality and quality assurance; the setting up and consolidation of the IQA systems in many institutions; and on the whole, the improvement of the institutional quality culture in HEIs (HD1, on the 22nd of January 2019).

Similarly, several of the informants from the two case universities avow that the HERQA has brought to the forefront the agenda of quality and quality assurance in the higher education sector in Ethiopia as a whole; and the inauguration of the EQA system has triggered more particularly the IQA initiatives and efforts in their institutions. In this case, generally, it is possible to construe that the Ethiopian higher education EQA system has been serving as an activator of the formative quality enhancement processes that take place in both institutions.

Apart from the holistic aspects, it might also be good to investigate the positive outcomes of the individual EQA approaches that are currently in place in case institutions. In this respect, regarding the external institutional quality audit, as is stipulated in various institutional documents of the HERQA (e.g., HERQA, 2006a, 2006b, 2006d, 2006e), both public and private HEIs in the country are demanded to go through it (based on the will and the consent of the auditee institutions). At this juncture, to reflect on the positive outcomes of the quality audit mechanism in case study universities, it is quite essential first, to look into the main aspirations or ambitions of the HERQA towards it. In this regard, for instance, HERQA (2006a) narrates that:

...an essential contribution to a HERQA institutional quality audit is a SED prepared by the HEI. An institutional quality audit will seek to verify claims of quality and relevance made in a SED. An institutional quality audit report prepared by HERQA will provide a description and evaluation of the quality of a HEI's activities and of its mechanisms for assuring quality and relevance. This report will make clear HERQA's confidence in the ability of the HEI to provide an appropriate education. A HERQA institutional quality audit report will highlight elements of good practice and make recommendations for improvements. In issuing institutional quality audit reports HERQA aims to support a HEI by recognizing its good practices and by indicating areas where changes in practice can enhance the quality and relevance of its activities. HERQA hopes that institutional quality audit reports and the dissemination of good practice will help to enhance the provision of higher education in Ethiopia and the confidence of all stakeholders in the quality of that provision (p. 4).

As to the above descriptions, the merits of the institutional external quality audit are expected to be revealed in three folds, that is, its significance/importance to the HERQA, HEIs, and other stakeholders at large. In this manner, the quality audit is, by and large, required to offer opportunities to audited institutions to self-scrutinize their own gaps, and thereby to exert the necessary efforts to bridge those gaps as much as possible. Furthermore, conducting a quality audit seeks to boost the confidence of the HERQA and other stakeholders upon the status of the provision of quality education in auditee institutions.

On top of that, a closer look at the outlooks of most of the informants from the two case universities indicates that the implementation of external institutional quality audit has: urged each institution to set up their own quality improvement and assurance directorates and within which organize quality controlling units across different academic programs; prompted each university to consider quality assurance as part and parcel of their mainstreamed activities; improved the trends and practices in the institutions with which they look into their own strengths and weaknesses (i.e., through institutional self-evaluation and self-reflection); and played as a whole, an important role to bring about changes in the existing quality culture in both institutions (though it is not as such adequate).

Therefore, it is clear on the face of the documents and from the viewpoints of the informants that as a positive viable contribution, among others, the external institutional quality audit approach is currently playing a significant role in steering the internal quality enhancement and assurance deeds in each of case study universities. Most importantly, the implementation of quality audit has resulted in the institutionalization of the quality assurance processes, and this in turn contributes somewhat to the betterment of the status of quality and provision of quality education in case universities. Nonetheless, a quality audit is still awaited to create more positive outcomes in the public and private institutions.

When it comes to the program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms, since they are now in action only in private HEIs in the country (public degree-granting institutions and their educational programs have not yet been liable to be accredited by the HERQA), their outcomes are expected to be a bit different from the institutional external quality audit approach.

To begin with, one interviewee from the HERQA in connection with the anticipated and the actual positive outcomes of accreditation and re-accreditation, reflects his views as follows:

The HERQA employs accreditations in private HEIs to make sure that whether they are in a position to meet the minimum quality standards or not... I believe the instigation of accreditation has led private HEIs to launch and run relevant, eligible, and up-to-date educational programs, and eventually impelled them to bring about practical differences in maintaining quality and ensuring the provision of quality education in their own institutions... (ACDE1, on August 1, 2018).

In a similar vein, several of the informants from private case institution substantiate that the implementation of educational program accreditation has: somewhat abetted the university community to be familiar with some essential subject-specific quality standards or criteria; stepped up the capability of the institution to respond properly to the required quality standards or criteria across different disciplines; boosted a sense of accountability among the leaders and the rest of the academic community members (at different levels) in the institution; motivated the university to work hard to be effective enough in delivering quality education/instruction to the learners (and in conveying other reliable services to its clientele); and helped the university to improve its institutional/organizational reputation and image.

Hence, of the above assertions, it is possible to deduce that the implementation of accreditation has positively resulted in the accomplishment of the basic requirements for a variety of educational programs that the university has inaugurated. In this respect, considering the global accreditation practices and experiences, Mishra (2006) points out that accreditation in all its forms and procedures is used to most prefer to assist and strengthen a HEI's IQA process. Nevertheless, in a broader sense, Hamdatu, Siddiek, and Al-Olyan (2013) have argued that the positive impacts of accreditation need to stem from its application on many categories such as society, students, graduates of higher education, labor market establishments, and competition. In this light, it is obvious that accreditation is still required to contribute more in the Ethiopian higher education context than what it has been currently operating in a very limited status only in private HEIs.

Apart from the positive outcomes, EQA systems have also carped for the undesired results they might bring to HEIs (Utuka, 2012). In this connection, the informants, particularly from the two case study universities enumerate some of the fallouts that are occurred following the implementation of the EQA system (mechanisms) in their respective institutions. For example,

those informants from private case institution have raised their points that owing to the top-down implementation of the EQA approaches (which is somewhat contravening with the autonomy of the institution), a lot of apprehensions and discontents are created among the staff members in the university. In addition to this, they have still whined that the HERQA's 'double standard' in public and private HEIs leads the leaders and other staff in the university to develop a great sense of prejudice and hatred towards the EQA system.

On top of that, from case universities, most of the informants have boldly remarked that consciously or unconsciously the current ways of applying the institutional external quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms tend to favor mere symbolic reactions or superficial responses from the institutions themselves. This is only because organizational orthodoxy to the institutional milieu instantaneously upsurges positive evaluation, resource flows, and therefore survival chances (Zucker, 1987). In line with this, Wondwosen (2012) suggests that "allaying the negative effects in EQA requires addressing the superficial elements of the system through the creation of a quality culture within institutions that do not respond artificially to external influences but embed the culture in a sustainable manner" (p. 22).

In general, based on their own unique characteristics, the institutional quality audit and the program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms have brought about different outcomes in case institutions. For instance, the quality audit, consistent with its inherent nature, has had institution-wide impacts (concentrating on input, process, and output aspects) in both universities. While the accreditation and re-accreditation (emphasizing mainly on input aspect) have impacted more the individual educational programs that dwell in the private institution. However, in general, as both the quality audit and the accreditation and re-accreditation approaches are being implemented in the private university, the institution has been a bit burdened and troubled (due to excessive control and regulation) and at the same time, reaped the positive outcomes more than the public counterpart. Therefore, it is worth noting at this point that there is a need to further strengthen the positive outcomes and simultaneously trim down the undesired ones to scale up the level of the actual practices of EQA in the public and private universities.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Final Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

This chapter deals with the final discussion or reflection, conclusions, and lastly, the main implications of this research study. Accordingly, a brief illustration is made on each component of the chapter, respectively.

8.1. Final Reflection

As has been alluded to earlier, the main objective of this study was to reveal the actual practices of EQA in case study public and private universities in Ethiopia. To this end, the qualitative research method and the comparative case study design were employed for the study. By so doing, the researcher has managed to elicit the conceptions, views, and positions of the informants and review the relevant documents regarding the essence (essential features) of the Ethiopian higher education EQA arrangement, its implementation practices, and the concomitant outcomes afterward, particularly in those case institutions, in a comparative manner. Following the accomplishment of the within-case and across-case analyses/comparisons, some major findings are drawn.

Thus, under this part, the final discussion (reflection) is being succinctly put forward emphasizing two major aspects. Firstly, the reflection on the major findings (in accordance with the order of the main thematic areas that are borne out of the basic research questions or the major areas of concern and the conceptual framework of the study), which juxtaposes the main results in this study with the research findings of other prominent studies in the area. This is meant to create a link between this particular study and other similar research undertakings elsewhere in the world, to foster empirical knowledge, and then to reach more trustworthy conclusions. Secondly, the theoretical and methodological reflection, which is geared to expound the overall roles and merits of the main theories and the research approaches that have been employed in this study, respectively.

8.1.1. Reflection on the Major Findings

This study has generated a variety of discursive conceptions, views, and positions upon the essence (i.e., meaning/scope and purposes/motives), implementation practices, and (perceived) outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system in the milieus of public and private case study universities.

At first, regarding the meanings that are articulated towards the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, the study has uncovered that there is a tendency in both case universities to conceptualize it exclusively as an external deed (alien to the institutions), which has (been decoupled from) not yet been adequately integrated with the mainstreamed activities in effect in the respective institutions. Apart from this similarity, particularly in the case of the public university, the EQA system has been considered as an activity that occasionally takes place in the form of external institutional quality audits and other related endeavors. Conversely, in the private university, as the EQA system has been manifested through the institutional external quality audit, accreditation/reaccreditation, etc., it is referred to as an everyday hot and contentious agenda of the institution. Consequently, the university community here is found to be somewhat well-informed about the EQA system than the public counterpart.

Pertinent to the results of this research, Martin and Stella (2007) put EQA as the actions and activities of an external, independent body that may be a quality assurance agency or anyone other than a HEI, to determine whether it is meeting the agreed or predetermined standards or criteria. In a similar notion of understanding, Kristensen (2010) also marks out EQA system as an external arrangement that embeds with self-assessment, peer review, report, and follow-up to give the institution under review a lot of valuable information, but the success of that information shall be mostly dependent on how well-developed the IQA system or the quality culture is of the institution in question. So with the presence of a comprehensive (and innovative) IQA system and vibrant organizational quality culture, it is likely possible to see greater responsiveness to external demands for accountability, transparency, and credibility (see Harvey, 2009a; Kristensen, 2010). Nonetheless, as my study has indicated, there has been no such a strong integration of the indoor quality enhancement and assurance efforts with the EQA system and requirements in both case institutions. Such a significant conflict between the institutional and task environments may in

turn impede effective task performance and subvert the goals (Selznick as cited in Zucker, 1987) in relation to EQA in case study universities.

Relating to the scope of EQA systems, some researchers in the field (e.g., Hanft & Kohler, 2008; Martin & Stella, 2007; UNESCO, 2011) have claimed that it works for the entire higher education system or with some segments that are, perhaps either in public or private HEIs. In the same studies, it is also put forward that in many parts of the world, public HEIs are financially backed by the government or state, and may therefore be of more quality than private educational providers. This has urged EQA systems to be strict enough in controlling the quality of private HEIs than public counterparts (but now such a trend is changing), like as is observed in the case of my study in Ethiopia. In this sense, there seem to have some overlaps between what has been found out in different research studies (e.g., Hanft & Kohler, 2008; Martin & Stella, 2007; UNESCO, 2006) and in the result obtained herein in my study.

Next to the meaning/scope, my study has dealt with the purposes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system. In this respect, ‘quality improvement’ and ‘quality control’ are boldly appeared to be its dual, major intentions (the inalienable drivers of the EQA system). As the study has further revealed, as a result of the particular EQA mechanisms that are in place in the respective case institutions, currently, the quality improvement intention has been partly materialized in both public and private universities, while the quality control only works for the private institution. In this way, the quality improvement and the quality control agendas have mostly been linked with the viable external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation approaches, respectively.

In connection with the aims of EQA, other researchers, for example, Martin and Stella (2007) enunciate that there is a wide range of purposes in higher education EQA that reflect governmental interest and demand or address the intrinsic desires of institutions. On this basis, specifically, the purpose of EQA is to: “improvement of quality, publicly available information on quality and standards, accreditation (i.e., the legitimization of certification of students), public accountability (for standards achieved and for use of money), and contribute to the higher education sector planning process” (David, 2004, p. 115). Similarly, for Bernhard (2012), ‘control’, ‘improvement’, and ‘accountability’ are commonly regarded as the major goals of higher education EQA (see Table 8.1, below).

For instance, quality control refers to “the traditional function whereby governments make sure that higher education provision is in line with the minimum requirements for quality” (Martin & Stella, 2007, p. 41). Martin and Stella further divulge that in systems that emphasize quality control, the EQA bodies may opt to have different actions to get rid of low-quality provisions in HEIs. This implies that quality control as one of the intentions of EQA systems, is supposed to be applied in HEIs that have poor educational quality. Nevertheless, in the case of Ethiopia, where there is a sharp decline of quality and provision of quality education in all HEIs (see Girmaw, 2014; Kedir, 2009; Saint, 2004; Tesfaye Semela, 2011), the realization of a quality control purpose only in private HEIs creates a question.

While a quality improvement ensures high-level standards through the active involvement of academic communities in HEIs (Harvey, 1996). As Materu (2007) reflects, since African countries envisage higher education to make a significant contribution to the economic growth and competitiveness, the improvement agenda in quality of education provisions, programs, and institutions becomes so vital and critical. By the same token, the existing quality improvement efforts (via the EQA system) in case study public and private institutions also need to be strengthened more in a way to help those universities to accomplish the national and institutional stated goals.

Table 8.1 An Overview of the Basic Features in EQA systems

Purpose	Control	Accountability	Improvement/Guidance
Preferred Mechanism	Licensing	Accreditation/assessment	Quality audit
Framework for Quality Assurance	Standard-based approach	Fitness for purpose together with fitness of purpose	Fitness for purpose
Procedure	External assessment	External and internal assessments	Self-assessment
Nature	Compulsory	Compulsory or voluntary	Voluntary

Source: Adapted from UNESCO (2006, Module 1, p. 32)

As the other objective of EQA, accountability in HEIs is frequently linked with value for money concerns, transparency, as well as public assurance (Harvey, 1999; Kristensen, 2010; Martin & Stella, 2007). However, as my study has indicated, since there is no as such a strong link between the existing EQA approaches and the public or government funding, very limited accountability is evident to the external stakeholders. Furthermore, as accreditation is compulsory and being taken place purely in the form of external licensing than assessment, the accountability seems to be downplayed/replaced by the quality control intention. This perhaps needs the attention of the concerned parties.

In all, with regard to the aims of EQA, Martin and Stella (2007) conclude that there have been extensive debates over whether the control, improvement, and accountability intentions are compatible or mutually exclusive. But it is worth noting that EQA systems need to address them all in one way or another.

The second central theme in my study specifically deals with the major EQA mechanisms and their implementation procedures, patterns, and challenges, particularly in the case of two selected institutions.

To begin with, as my study has substantiated, the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation are the most commonly used EQA approaches. Nevertheless, even though the quality audit is by now in effect in both case universities, accreditation and re-accreditation are being implemented only to the private institution. Educational programs in public HEIs are not demanded to have accreditations from the HERQA as a whole. At this juncture, when it comes to the global context, as EQA schemes are becoming multifunctional systems (having multifaceted purposes and intentions), they embrace new roles, notably licensing, institutional quality audits, academic program accreditation, etc. (Materu, 2007; UNESCO, 2006, 2011). To this effect, accreditation and quality audits need to be employed as the key EQA mechanisms in HEIs (Martin & Stella, 2007).

In the milieu of globalization, where there is an increasing need for standardization (of educational programs and institutions), EQA arrangements starting to embrace an accreditation function. As a result, nowadays, accreditation has become popular in every corner of the world (Hamdatu, Siddiek, & Al-Olyan, 2013; UNESCO, 2006). Nonetheless, in the East African higher education

contexts, the difference between licensing and accreditation has not yet been clear, and therefore, the accreditation practice in the region is more of a process of quality control, based upon input standards (Yohannes, 2007). Likewise, as my research study has revealed, accreditation has been used mostly as a means of patronizing or controlling the quality in the private institution.

Whereas a quality audit judges the extent to which a given HEI has a quality monitoring or management system in place that visibly conveys its strengths and weaknesses (Harvey, 2002b; UNESCO, 2011). Moreover, Bernhard (2012) and Kristensen (2010) remark that as the quality audit has the focus on HEIs' IQA systems and the development of their quality cultures, it can be most supportive to the amelioration of quality education. In this light, my study has also uncovered that institutional external quality audit has been contributing to the improvement of quality and the provision of quality education in the public and private universities.

With respect to the procedures, Martin and Stella (2007) note that the accreditation and the quality audit need to follow some stapes like conducting self-assessment and external review emphasizing predetermined and transparent criteria, making judgments on institutions or programs being audited or evaluated, publicizing the terminal reports, and finally ensuring the validity of the audit or accreditation for a certain period. In this regard, as my research study has corroborated, those essential procedures have also been employed to operate external institutional quality audit and academic program accreditation and re-accreditation in case study institutions. However, unlike the existing trends in many parts of the world, in East Africa (including Ethiopia), the accreditation and the quality audit do not seem to have a strong link or complementarity with each other; and the quality audit results have not been used for allocation of funds or ranking the auditee institutions yet (Wondwosen, 2018a; Yohannes, 2007).

In connection with the implementation patterns, by considering the East African contexts, Yohannes (2007) points out that in many countries of the region, there is no obligation to conduct program and institutional accreditation in public universities, whereas private institutions have to go through a licensing and accreditation process (as is already indicated, my study has also confirmed this fact in the case of two selected institutions). But as far as the institutional quality audit is concerned, since it has already become a norm virtually in all HEIs throughout the world (Wondwosen, 2018a; Yohannes, 2007), now it is being implemented in public and private case institutions. Nonetheless, after considering the contributions of public and private HEIs to the

fulfillment of national policy objectives, currently, there is a tendency in many countries indiscriminately to push all their HEIs to go through the criteria of a wide range of EQA approaches (UNESCO, 2006). Such a trend perhaps be so useful to beef up the actual EQA practices in public and private case universities.

With regard to the challenges, this research study has dealt with a lot of exogenous and endogenous issues that are stemmed from the institutional and technical environments⁵², respectively, and inhibiting the implementation of the EQA system (mechanisms), particularly in public and private case institutions. Some of these challenges are: the presence of contentious and ambiguous higher education legal provisions or regulatory framework; the autonomy, credibility, and capacity constraints of the HERQA; the lack of adequate involvement (ownership and commitment) of multiple external stakeholders or professional bodies and internal actors in the course of the EQA system implementation; the presence of substantial shortfalls in essential (human, financial, and material) resources in the universities; etc. Actually, these issues have also been raised in various ways in the studies (e.g., Harvey, 2009a; Hsu, 2017; Kristensen, 2010; Martin & Stella, 2007; Materu, 2007; Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman, & Westerheijden, 2011; Yohannes, 2007) that are conducted in different parts of the world.

Those non-university-specific and university-specific implementation challenges that are facing case universities are invariably derived from the external and internal environments, respectively. However, as is revealed in the previous chapter, the pressures that are created external to the universities especially the coercive rules, requirements, and expectations are more affecting the actual practices of EQA in case study institutions than the normative and the mimetic ones in the realm of the institutional environment and the elements of the contextual environments, which are specific or somewhat unique to each institution. Perhaps this is meant to ensure conformity or compliance with the existing national standards or requirements (see Greening & Gray, 1994; Kondra & Hurst, 2009; Zucker, 1987). But quality assurance policy consensus ought to take into account various contextual factors (Mhlanga, 2008); and most importantly, institutions need to do organizational reforms and take managerial actions to conquer the expected policy outcomes (Bess & Dee, 2008). Thus, besides considering the national objective realities, there is still a need to

⁵² See Chapter Three.

look into the task environments (of the HEIs) to alleviate those setbacks and then eventually to boost the level of the actual EQA practices in the public and private institutions.

Lastly, the present research has attempted to come up with some positive and undesired (perceived) outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system following its implementation in the two case study universities.

With respect to the positive outcome, the EQA system has been predominantly seen as an engine for the indoor quality enhancement and assurance endeavors and activities in the individual institutions. While in regard to the fallouts, because of the fact that the existing EQA system has mainly a periodic actual manifestation, (though the degree varies) it has brought about temporary adjustments in the universities. Meaning that the institutions are not often strictly prompted to accomplish their jobs wholeheartedly, but rather only to show their symbolic compliance towards some prominent criteria of the EQA system. Likewise, such contrasting outcomes have also been implied in one way or another in the studies (e.g., David, 2004; Harvey, 2002b, 2009; Hsu, 2017; Kis, 2005; Kristensen, 2010; Stensaker et al., 2011) that are undertaken in various parts of the world.

When organizations are able to respond effectively towards the external pressures and make alignments to the organizational contingencies, there is a great possibility to attain legitimacy, high performance in their core activities to be performed, and survival chances (Bess & Dee, 2008; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Donaldson, 2001; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1987). Hence, there might be a need for case institutions to avoid misalignments with (the fundamental and stringent requirements of) the environments, be it internal or external, or institutional or technical.

8.1.2. Theoretical and Methodological Reflection

Regarding the theories, this study has utilized the neo-institutional and the contingency theoretical underpinnings to formulate the conceptual framework and to delimit the leading constructs in order to serve as part of the implicit and/or explicit analytic bases in the study.

The neo-institutional theory emphasizes social or cultural, political, legal, economic, technological, and other related issues of the changing external environment that act and impact

upon organizations (Daft, 2007; Greening & Gray, 1994; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). A certain organization can optimally function, when it is capable of complying with rules, routines, regulations, assumptions, or norms in an environment that exists outside of it (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Mayer & Rowan, 1977; Sandhu, 2018; Zucker, 1987). Furthermore, as Zucker (1987) explains, the institutional environment entails the pressures that are exerted by the state in the form of obligations, acts, laws, rules, and regulations or by professions, based on their widespread authorities. Therefore, in my study, the neo-institutional theory more particularly serves to discern and light up some of the external issues that are decisive to manipulate the actual EQA practices in case study institutions.

While the contingency theory stresses the unique or technical environment of an individual organization (Bess & Dee, 2008; Betts, 2003; Donaldson, 2001; Galbraith, 1973; Scott, 1992); and advocates a process of reaching ‘fit’ between the circumstances of the environment and the design of an organization (Bess & Dee, 2008) or an organization process of adaption to the environment (Daft, 2007; Sporn, 1999). Besides, the contingency theory dictates how an organization is being successfully organized and well-versed to cope with manifold circumstances (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). In this manner, the contingency theory has contributed a lot to differentiate and mark out the major internal aspects that can impact the EQA deeds in case universities.

After the key constructs were distinctly discerned based on the underlying tenets in the neo-institutional and the contingency organizational theories, they have been contextualized in terms of the prevailing national and institutional objective realities. In this way, they offered analytical guidance and guided the researcher to shape and reshape the basic research questions and in the study.

In general, the neo-institutional and the contingency theories have greatly helped the study to holistically approach the subject matter, and eventually to come up with some strong findings that demonstrate the actual EQA practices (i.e., the essence, implementation practices, and perceived outcomes) in the milieus of case study public and private institutions. At this juncture, I therefore strongly uphold my position that using the two theories together as a theoretical basis, could possibly augment the worth of other similar research attempts in the area. But still, I can insist that making use (the possible mix) of other relevant organizational and cultural theories may offer manifold lenses and most comprehensively illustrate the subject under study.

With respect to the research design , as this study has intended to understand the actual EQA practices in public and private case institutions, the qualitative research methods and the comparative case study design were deemed so useful. Thus, their application has prominently enabled the researcher to look more deeply into the conceptions, views, and positions of the informants in line with the essence, implementation practices, and outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, particularly in the contexts of the two universities. However, so as to get more comprehensive or wide-ranging results, still, there is a need to conduct large-scale (qualitative and quantitative) studies in the area.

8.2. Conclusions

From the preceding general and theoretical and methodological reflections, a lot of conclusions are reached. These conclusive remarks in keeping with the order of the basic research questions in the study are presented in turn next.

In relation to the first basic research question, as the study has revealed, there is a tendency to conceptualize the EQA system purely as an external deed that has been decoupled from/loosely coupled with the mainstreamed activities in case institutions. The actual circumstance here is contributed a lot to the existing limited cognition or understanding of the real essence of the EQA system (practices) in the universities (though the degree somewhat varies in case institutions).

This research has also shown that as a result of the particular EQA mechanisms that are in effect in respective case institutions, currently, the quality improvement intention has been materialized in both universities, whereas the quality control is only meant for the private institution. However, where there is a steep decline in quality and provision of quality education in all HEIs, this discrepancy or dichotomy is strongly questioned.

In connection with the second overarching research question, the study has found that the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation are the most commonly used EQA approaches in case study universities. The Accreditation (which is more of licensing) has been obligatorily put in place in the private institution (as a process of quality control) to ensure minimum input standards are being met, while the institutional external quality audit (emphasizes input, process, and output) is meant for the improvement or amelioration of quality and provision of quality education in both universities. To handle the quality audit and

the accreditations, the HERQA has employed more or less rigorous international standards and procedures. Nevertheless, unlike the pervading worldwide trend, the quality audit and the accreditations do not seem to have a strong link with each other; and particularly, the institutional quality audit results have not been used for making reallocations of funds, ranking, etc. yet.

As this research study has also disclosed, a lot of non-university-specific and university-specific challenges are constraining the effective implementation of the EQA system (mechanisms) in case institutions. Some of them are: the presence of contentious and ambiguous regulatory framework (legal provisions); the autonomy, credibility, and capacity or capability limitations of the HERQA; the lack of adequate involvement of multiple external stakeholders and internal actors in the course of the EQA system implementation; the shortage of human, financial, and material resources in case universities; etc. These institutional and contextual setbacks have brought about somewhat different repercussions in case study institutions.

Relating to the last principal research question, the study has uncovered that the EQA system is believed to be brought the agenda of quality to the forefront, and a bit served as a catalyst for the indoor quality assurance efforts in case study universities. Conversely, the EQA system has largely brought about temporary adjustments (symbolic compliance) in those institutions.

To sum up, as both the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation approaches are being implemented in the private university, the institution is burdened by excessive control and regulation and, at the same time, reaps the positive outcomes more than the public counterpart.

8.3 Implications of the Study

On the basis of the foregoing final discussion and reflection and conclusions, some possible implications can be made in the study. Therefore, the suggestions are offered on the one hand, to different parties such as the Ethiopian government/the MoSHE, the HERQA, and the individual case study universities for critical considerations to revamp the actual EQA practices, and on the other hand, to scholars to conduct further studies in the area.

8.3.1 Suggestions to the Government and/or the MoSHE:

- The study has found that legally, there is a gap to induce the HERQA to equally treat the degree-granting public and private HEIs in the country (though they are in the contexts where quality and provision of quality education are uniformly deteriorating). However, “since education is a public good, all HEIs (public and private) should be assessed with a single and uniform set of standards and procedures to avoid dichotomy” (Tesfaye, 2015, p. 74). So to achieve this end, recommended that the Ethiopian government or the MoSHE could look for a better and sustainable policy intervention with which public and private HEIs might be treated fairly.
- The study has also unveiled that the HERQA has serious limitations in its autonomy, credibility, and capacity or capability. Thus, the government/the MoSHE might work hard to help the HERQA to be: fully independent/autonomous, credible in the eyes of all HEIs and other stakeholders, capable (by fulfilling the commensurate human, financial, and material resources), and a truly viable professional agency (that is in a position to comply with the norms and dynamics in the national and international arena).
- Furthermore, as the study has shown, more particularly the private university is now suffering from the lack of human, material, and financial resources than the public counterpart. This has been vastly stifling the operations in the institution. Hence, to reverse the current pessimistic status, the government/the MoSHE may need to find sustainable ways to render the necessary support and assistance especially for those of good performing private HEIs in the country.
- finally, the government/the MoSHE ought to initiate a policy dialogue with the active participation of all concerned parties and the public at large so that there might be a possibility to overhaul the higher education EQA system in the country. Besides this, the government/the MoSHE should encourage effective domestic and international researches to be undertaken in the area to formulate a suitable national quality assurance policy framework and to make easy the adaption of versatile, good practices from all over the world.

8.3.2 Suggestions to the HERQA:

- The study has boldly revealed that the actual way of implementing the EQA mechanisms has mainly espoused superficial reactions or responses to come from the public and private universities. Therefore, HERQA could look for an appropriate strategy by which those

approaches to be translated into effect in a way that instigates the institutions to take up the leading responsibility in the quality assurance processes and to genuinely respond to the requirements of the EQA system.

- The study has also indicated that some of the threshold descriptors, standards or criteria, reference points, and indicative sources of information of the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation and reaccreditation lack relevance and clarity. Thus, to avert this, HERQA might revisit them very carefully (with adequate involvement of the concerned parties or stakeholders).
- In regard to the (post) implementation process of the institutional external quality audit, the study has demonstrated that HERQA has a serious gap to monitor the realization of the action plans that are prepared by the individual case institutions on the basis of the audit results. As Abeya (2014) enunciates, “it may be a waste of time and money to conduct quality audits unless it is followed by actions for improvement and enhancement” (p. 345). Hence, the necessary attention and emphasis need to be paid by HERQA to further tighten and strengthen its current follow-up activities, and in turn, to ensure that the needed change and improvement have occurred in the auditee institutions.
- Moreover, the study has uncovered that there is a lack of adequate involvement of (members of) different external professional associations/groups and even graduates, employers, other experts in the course of the EQA system implementation in case institutions. This has somewhat crippled the authenticity and credibility of the EQA system as a whole. So, HERQA ought to create or design clearer ways and better platforms through which the participation of those parties could be improved.
- Finally, to best serve the higher education sector in Ethiopia, HERQA could launch a new, all-inclusive, and up-to-date organizational structure that enables it to operate its activities well; hire the needed expert staff with the right professional competency and caliber to discharge its responsibilities; and overall, set up a new EQA system (model) that suits the pervading global and domestic phenomena.

8.3.3 Suggestions to the HEIs:

- The study has found that due to the decoupling of the EQA system from the core activities, (though the degree differs) there is a lack of adequate participation of leaders and academic and other staff in the course of EQA system (approaches) implementation in case study

universities. Therefore, there is a need to work hard to make sure that the EQA system is well integrated into the institutions' underlying working philosophies, strategies, cultures, and structures. In turn, this perhaps improves the level of engagement and empowerment of especially those internal actors in the EQA process.

- As Utuka (2012) underscores, “HEIs should be adequately resourced to enable them to establish and operate efficient quality assurance systems” (p. 265). Nevertheless, the study has ascertained that case study institutions are currently suffering from the lack of (the necessary) human, material, financial, etc. resources (though the degree seems to be so severe in the private university than the public counterpart). Thus, the case study universities should design their own suitable ways and strategies by which this bottleneck is going to be mitigated.
- In the end, the case study universities ought to give due considerations to both institutional and technical issues (i.e., external and internal environment, respectively), and try to respond properly towards and make the right adjustments with them in a way to meet the fundamental requirements of EQA system.

8.3.4 Suggestions for Further Research:

This research study has dealt with the actual practices of EQA, particularly in the contexts of the two selected institutions in a comparative fashion. However, in the current scenario, where there is enormous institutional and enrolment expansion of higher education in Ethiopia, additional studies may deserve to be conducted emphasizing on the following topical issues: the nexus between EQA and IQA systems in the Ethiopian higher education context; the role of EQA and IQA systems in the augmentation of teaching-learning, research, and community service in HEIs in Ethiopia; the impact of globalization on quality assurance processes and endeavors in Ethiopian HEIs; the comparative analysis of external/quality assurance practices in Ethiopia and some other/selected countries of the world; etc.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Example of Informed Consent

Addis Ababa University
College of Educational and Behavioral Studies
Center for Comparative Education and Policy Studies

Informed Consent Form

Research Title: - External Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education: Comparing Practices in Public and Private Universities

Based upon the permission that has already been granted by the AAU, CCEPS, I am undertaking this PhD research project under the guidance of the principal supervisor –Professor Petra Angervall from Gothenburg University, Department of Education and Special Education and the co-supervisor –Dr. Teshome Nekatibeb (Associate Professor) from AAU, CCEPS. The main objective of this research study is to understand the actual practices of EQA, particularly in the contexts of case study public and private universities in Ethiopia. Therefore, to achieve this end, you are kindly invited to participate as an interview/ a focus group informant and to offer the needed information in this research project. Here, I need to assure you that your responses/information will be kept confidential and your personal identities will never be associated with the findings of this study in any way. However, you have the full authority/right not to be able to answer any of my questions in any form and manner if you do not feel comfortable at them. Also, still, you are free to interrupt or stop your involvement in this research process at any time you like.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Please write your name and put your signature below if you agree to participate in this research project.

The Informant's Name _____ Signature _____ Date _____
(I am signing the consent form with my full knowledge and understanding of the purpose and the nature of this research study)

The Researcher's Name _____ Signature _____ Date _____

NB. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep it as your own record.

Appendix B: List of Interview and FGD Informants and their Respective Codes in the Study

Positions/Ranks	Number of Sampled Informants and their Respective Codes in each Institution/Organization				Total	Data Gathering Instruments
	MoSHE	HERQA	DU	SMU		
Senior Official	1 (M1)	-	-	-	1	Interview
Director-General and Deputy Director-General	-	2 (HD1 & HD2)	-	-	2	Interview
Quality Audit and Enhancement Directorate Director/Expert and Accreditation, Equivalence, and Authentication of Educational Credentials Directorate Director/Expert	-	2 (AUDE1 & ACDE1)	-	-	2	Interview
Presidents and/or Vice Presidents	-	-	2 (DP1 & DP2)	3 (SP1-SP3)	5	Interview
Quality Improvement/Assurance Directors and Quality Experts	-	-	3 (DQA1-DQA3)	2 (SQA1 & SQA2)	5	Interview
College or Institute Deans/Heads	-	-	2 (DD1 & DD2)	2 (SD1 & SD2)	4	Interview
Senior Academic Staff (teachers and/or researchers)	-	-	5 (DAS1-DAS5)	5 (SAS1-SAS5)	10	FGD
Total	1	4	12	12	29	

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guides

The main aim of conducting the interviews is to get the conceptions, views, and positions of the respondents about the essence, implementation practices, and outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, particularly in the milieu of case study public and private universities. Therefore, the interview questions that are prepared for the interviewees from the MoSHE, the HERQA, and the two case institutions are presented as follows:

1. Interview Questions for the Senior Official at the MoSHE

- How do you conceive the overall spirit, motives, and/or purposes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system?
- How do you see the overall implementation status of the EQA system in public and private HEIs?
- What do you think are the major implementation challenges of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system (in public and private HEIs)? How do they affect the actual implementation?
- Do you think that the EQA arrangement creates a greater burden on private HEIs than the public counterparts? If say yes, how do you justify?
- What does EQA bring to the Ethiopian higher education sector in general and to public and private HEIs in particular?
- In what ways can the current EQA practices be promoted in public and private HEIs in the country?

2. **Interview Questions for the Director-General and the Deputy Director-General of the HERQA**

- How do you describe the overall ethos, motives, and/or purposes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system?
- How do you evaluate the autonomy, credibility, and powers/duties of the HERQA?
- What are the most commonly used EQA mechanisms in private and public HEIs in the country? How do you examine their implementation status in those institutions?
- What do you think are the major implementation setbacks of the EQA system (approaches) in public and private HEIs? How do they affect the implementation?
- What do you think about the implementation patterns of the EQA system in private and public HEIs? How do you analyse the impacts?
- What does the commencement of EQA bring to the Ethiopian higher education sector in general and to public and private HEIs in particular?
- How can the present EQA practices be improved in public and private HEIs in Ethiopia?

3. Interview Questions for the Quality Audit and Enhancement Directorate Director/Quality Audit Senior Expert of the HERQA

- How do you expound the motives and/or purposes of the external institutional quality audit?
- How do you examine the overall implementation status of the institutional external quality audit in public and private HEIs?
- How do you evaluate the involvement of internal actors and external stakeholders in the course of implementation of the external institutional quality audit in public and private HEIs in the country?
- What do you think are the main constraints of implementing the external institutional quality audit mechanism in public and private HEIs? How do they affect the actual implementation?
- What does the implementation of the institutional external quality audit bring to public and private HEIs?
- How can the current external institutional quality audit practices be improved in public and private HEIs?

4. Interview Questions for the Accreditation, Equivalence, and Authentication of Educational Credentials Directorate Director/Accreditation Senior Expert of the HERQA

- How do you elucidate the purposes and/or motives of the (academic program) accreditation and re-accreditation?
- How do you evaluate the overall implementation status of the (academic program) accreditation and re-accreditation in private HEIs?
- How do you judge the participation of internal actors and external stakeholders in the course of implementation of the (academic program) accreditation and re-accreditation in private HEIs in the country?
- What do you think are the critical challenges of implementing the (academic program) accreditation and re-accreditation approaches in private HEIs? How do they affect the actual implementation?
- What do you think about the existing 'double standard' in the implementation of the EQA system in public and private HEIs?
- What does the implementation of the (academic program) accreditation/reaccreditation bring to private HEIs?
- In what ways do you think can the present accreditation and re-accreditation practices be promoted/improved?

5. Interview Questions for the Presidents and/or Vice Presidents, Quality Improvement/Assurance Directors and Quality Experts, and College or Institute Deans/Heads in the Public and Private Case Study Universities

- How do you describe the overall features (e.g., spirit, motives, purposes, etc.) of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system (that is in place in your institution)?
- How do you see the implementation of the major EQA mechanism/s in your institution? How do you evaluate the involvement of different parties in the implementation process?
- What do you think are the major external and internal implementation setbacks of the EQA system in your institution? How do they affect the actual implementation?
- Do you think that the EQA arrangement creates a burden on HEIs? If say yes, how do you justify?
- What does EQA bring to your institution?
- How can the current EQA practices be improved?

Appendix D: Focus Group Interview/Discussion (FGD) Guides

The main thrust of conducting the focus group interviews is to capture the conceptions, views, and positions of the participants in terms of the essence, implementation practices, and (perceived) outcomes of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system, particularly in the contexts of public and private case study universities. Hence, the FGD questions that are prepared for the participants from the two institutions are presented as follows:

1. Focus Group Interview Questions for the Academic Staff in the Public University

- How do you describe the essential features of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system (that is in effect in your institution)? How do you see its motives and/or purposes?
- How do you evaluate the implementation of the institutional external quality audit approach in your institution?
- How do you judge the involvement of different parties in the course of implementation of the external institutional quality audit and other related EQA activities in your institution?
- What do you think are the major internal and external implementation restraints of the EQA system in your institution? How do they affect the implementation? In what ways can these setbacks be overcome?
- What does EQA bring to your institution?

2. FGD Questions for the Academic Staff (Teachers) in the Private University

- How do you delineate the essential features of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system (that is in place in your institution)? How do you see its motives and/or purposes?
- How do you evaluate the implementation of the external institutional quality audit and the academic program accreditation/reaccreditation mechanisms in your institution?
- How do you judge the participation of different parties in the course of implementation of the institutional quality audit and the accreditations approaches in your institution?
- What do you think are the critical external and internal implementation setbacks of the EQA system in your institution? How do they affect the actual implementation? In what ways can these challenges be addressed?
- Do you think that the EQA arrangement creates a greater burden on private HEIs than the public counterparts? If say yes, how do you justify?
- What does EQA bring to your institution?

Appendix E: Document Review Guides

1. Some Document Review Topics/Themes

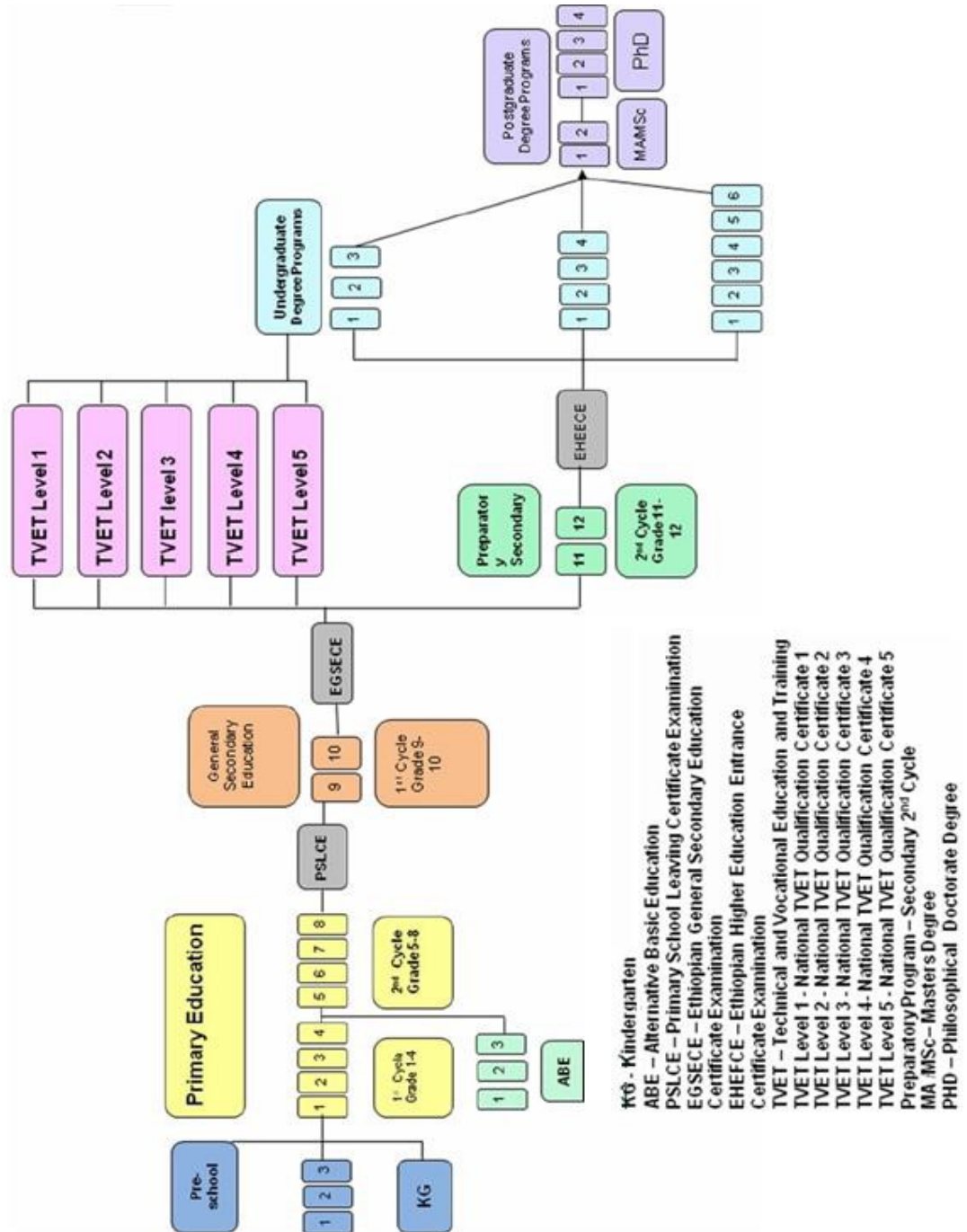
- Powers and duties of the MoSHE and the HERQA;
- The nature of public and private institutions in the Ethiopian higher education context;
- The context and background of the two case study universities (i.e., the SMU and the DU);
- The overall features of the Ethiopian higher education EQA system;
- The meaning, scope, procedures, and standards of the external institutional quality audit approach;
- The meaning, steps/procedures, and criteria of the academic program accreditation and re-accreditation mechanisms; etc.

2. List of Some Reviewed Documents in the Study

- The 351/2003 and the 650/2009 Ethiopian higher education proclamations (MoE, 2003; FDRE, 2009);
- The HERQA's publications on the external institutional quality audit mechanism (i.e., HERQA, 2006a, 2006b, 2006d, 2006e, 2011a, 2011b);
- The HERQA's publication on the accreditation and re-accreditation checklists, processes, and procedures (i.e., HERQA, 2016);
- The external institutional quality audit report and other related documents about the public university (i.e., DU, 2014; FDRE, 2006, 2011; HERQA, 2013); and
- The institutional quality audit reports and other related documents/archives about the private institution (i.e., HERQA, 2004, 2009; SMU, 2017); etc.

Appendix F: Other Appendices

1. The Current Ethiopian Education and Training System



Source: MoE (2015, p. 8)

