

Exploring Internal Quality Assurance System in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions: Practices and Challenges

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Received: 22 December 2025
Revised: 21 February 2026
Accepted: 22 February 2026

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practices and challenges of the internal quality assurance system in improving the quality of education in higher education institutions (HEIs). A qualitative research method was employed, with participants selected purposely to reflect the diverse perspectives involved in the issue of the internal quality assurance system. Data were collected through interviews followed by a review of relevant documents related to the internal quality assurance system. The findings indicate that key informants were largely unaware of the HEIs' internal quality assurance system rules, procedures, and processes. There was also a notable lack of clarity and accessible information regarding the HEIs' internal quality assurance system. Many stakeholders assumed that quality assurance is the sole role of experts and officers working at the quality assurance offices in HEIs, even though the assumption is not real. The study also found a significant gap in translating theoretical frameworks into the practical implementation of internal quality assurance systems in HEIs. In addition, the result reveals that several factors adversely affect the system, including unclear guidelines, low stakeholder awareness, insufficient autonomy, lack of necessary resources, inadequate working conditions, and a weak monitoring and evaluation system.

Keywords: Challenges, Practices, Internal Quality Assurance System, Quality Education

استكشاف نظام ضمان الجودة الداخلي في مؤسسات التعليم العالي الإثيوبية: الممارسات والتحديات

الملخص:

هدفت هذه الدراسة الى التحقيق في ممارسات وتحديات نظام ضمان الجودة الداخلي واثرها على تحسين جودة التعليم في مؤسسات التعليم العالي. تم استخدام منهج البحث الكيفي، حيث تم اختيار المشاركين بطريقتة قصدية ليعكسوا وجهات النظر المتنوعة المتعلقة بمسألة نظام ضمان الجودة الداخلي. جمعت البيانات من خلال مقابلات، تلاها مراجعة للوثائق ذات الصلة بنظام ضمان الجودة الداخلي. وتشير النتائج إلى أن المستجيبين الرئيسيين كانوا غير مدركين إلى حد كبير لقواعد وإجراءات وعمليات نظام ضمان الجودة الداخلي في مؤسسات التعليم العالي. كما لوحظ نقص ملحوظ في الوضوح والمعلومات المتاحة بشأن نظام ضمان الجودة الداخلي في مؤسسات التعليم العالي. فقد افترض العديد من أصحاب المصلحة أن ضمان الجودة يقتصر على الخبراء والموظفين العاملين في مكاتب ضمان الجودة في هذه المؤسسات، على الرغم من أن هذا الافتراض غير صحيح. كشفت الدراسة أيضاً عن فجوة كبيرة في ترجمة الأطر النظرية إلى التطبيق العملي لنظام ضمان الجودة الداخلي في مؤسسات التعليم العالي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أظهرت النتائج أن عدة عوامل تؤثر سلباً على النظام، بما في ذلك عدم وضوح المبادئ التوجيهية، وضعف وعي أصحاب المصلحة، وعدم كفاية الاستقلالية، ونقص الموارد اللازمة، وظروف العمل غير الملائمة، وضعف نظام الرصد والتقييم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحديات، الممارسات، نظام ضمان الجودة الداخلي، جودة التعليم

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Introduction

This section provides a brief overview of quality assurance, highlighting its emergence as a significant issue in higher education institutions (HEIs). In recent years, quality assurance has gained prominence as a critical topic within HEIs.

Initially concentrating on the commercial and industrial sectors, quality assurance eventually broadened its scope to include more issues, most notably those pertaining to public services (Manatos et al., 2017). It has expanded dramatically in higher education since the 1980s, becoming an essential and ubiquitous feature of academic establishments and solidifying its position as a crucial element of academic quality (Huisman et al., 2015). Quality frameworks have been essential to higher education since the 1960s. They promote accountability measures, enable benchmarking at the disciplinary, institutional, and national levels, and help preserve academic standards across disciplines (Gunn & Cheng, 2015). The quality of education has always been a top priority for universities since their founding (Tamrat, 2020).

Student enrollments and the range of undergraduate programs offered by both public and private universities have significantly increased as a result of Ethiopia's higher education institutions' (HEIs) rapid expansion (Kahsay, 2012). However, due to a lack of financial and human resources required to provide high-quality instruction, the rapid development has had a negative effect on educational quality (Yirdaw, 2016).

Ethiopia consequently prioritizes upholding academic standards and guaranteeing the caliber of its HEIs. Both national and institutional quality assurance procedures are used to improve the caliber of research and instruction, as well as to give stakeholders pertinent information on academic excellence and graduate employment. It's critical to acknowledge that scholarly viewpoints on quality assurance vary, reflecting differing opinions on what it comprises and the most effective ways to monitor and enhance it in higher education (Geda, 2014).

Numerous variables have propelled the quality assurance movement in recent decades. These include worries about deteriorating academic standards, dwindling confidence in conventional quality management systems and their capacity to fulfill job demands, a lack of funding, growing demands for responsibility, and growing competitiveness and diversity in the educational environment (Wen et al., 2022).

By Proclamation No. 351/2003, the Higher Education Relevant and Quality Agency (HERQA) was established in 2003 to protect educational quality. By encouraging an organizational culture that promotes quality and ongoing improvement, HERQA plays a crucial role in directing and regulating Ethiopia's higher education industry (FDRE, 2003). HERQA's objective, according to Teshome (2017), is to guarantee that authorized HEIs fulfill defined requirements and that their programs are pertinent to the labor market and national growth, and to assist the sector in improving both quality and relevance.

Although most systems rely on one or a mix of essential principles, different countries use different concepts and procedures in quality assurance. One such method, according to Mishra et al. (2007), is self-evaluation, which involves institutions examining their own processes and performance with an eye toward external standards, staff development, and the use of both local and international performance indicators and best practices.

Another approach is accreditation, a process through which an authority evaluates an institution or program to certify that it meets predefined minimum standards (Saketa, 2014). According to Craft (2003), accreditation confirms that an institution or program has clear educational objectives, realistic expectations of achievement, has made significant progress towards those goals, and operates feasibly.

Besides, HERQA (2006) defines a quality audit as a review of a university's core activities by HERQA or a similar agency to ensure that programs, curricula, staffing, infrastructure, and other elements align with the institution's objectives and maintain quality and accountability. Peer review, another method, involves experts in a field, such as respected academics or professionals, assessing works or proposals, providing feedback, and making judgments about program quality or institutional standards (FDRE, 2009).

Craft (2003) describes peer review as the process where experienced educators, researchers, and practitioners evaluate and advise on new program proposals, continued curriculum development, research quality, and institutional performance. Periodic reviews of programs, courses, instructional materials, and results based on Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) standards are another aspect of quality assessments (HERQA, 2006).

As a result of the aforementioned factors, HEIs started thinking about ways to improve their internal quality by developing integrated quality management systems, implementing internal quality assurance systems, and conducting self-evaluations to ensure they were ready for both national and international accreditation. The development and implementation of best practice applications that cover all facets of program design, delivery, integrated performance evaluation, and follow-up are also receiving a lot of attention from educational institutions.

Statement of the problem

Over the past 20 years, Ethiopia has seen a sharp rise in the number of public and private higher education institutions with significant enrollment. The industry's ability to offer top-notch instruction, research, and services has been adversely affected by the quick expansion of HEIs and students as well as a lack of sufficient funding (Narkhede et al., 2026). Higher education quality concerns have been a focus for the Ethiopian government (Kahsay, 2012; Materu, 2007). The nation is growing more aware of the necessity of high-quality planning and execution of strategies to raise educational standards.

However, the development of higher education institutions, pressure from a rapidly shifting labor market, and the notable increase in enrollments during the 1980s and 1990s despite diminishing resources have all combined to raise new concerns about quality throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Ethiopia (Materu, 2007).

In light of the growing demands of competitiveness in all industries on a national and international level, raising educational standards is a strategic decision. Higher education has a strategic function in the educational units at the education level and path. Quality management is very customer-focused in both local and international markets, and higher education institutions have evolved into multinational organizations. Therefore, in order to ensure the quality of their education, HEIs must pay close attention to certain issues pertaining to their marketing, performance evaluation, and international competition (Zaki, 2020).

Globally, external quality assurance processes like accreditation, audit, or evaluation are the main emphasis of quality assurance. However, in many nations, the importance of creating a strong internal quality system is frequently disregarded or undervalued. Achieving effective and transformational quality requires an internal quality assurance system, which is often overlooked or only created to imitate external criteria. Staff and students are generally unwilling to participate in internal processes, despite their significance (Martin, 2018). According to the scholarly literature, most research in Ethiopia tends to focus more on quality improvement than quality assurance.

Materu (2007) states that although many people in Africa have made an effort to document advancements, no thorough mapping and analysis of the region's quality assurance systems has yet been carried out. There is still a dearth of diverse research findings that employ a range of approaches to gauge the quality of higher education, despite improvements in Ethiopian HEIs' quality assessment systems.

The systemic and methodical design and execution of internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions is lacking, despite the Ethiopian government's awareness of the need for effective quality planning and implementation and its attention to the issue at all levels. Additionally, there is a lack of research on internal quality assurance systems that focuses on the real implementation of such systems in higher education institutions, despite the abundance of studies on quality assurance in general.

Institutional quality audit is another factor that motivates the researcher to carry out this investigation. Rarely do HEIs use the 10 HERQA priority areas to assess the quality of education. A quality audit checklist is usually used during quality audits to evaluate or manage institutional quality. But there's more to quality assurance than using a checklist (Abebe, 2015).

More research is specifically needed to determine how the system may be implemented practically and what obstacles stand in the way of its deployment in HEIs. Therefore, investigating the internal quality assurance system procedures and difficulties in Ethiopian HEIs is crucial.

Research Questions

Based on the background information and the problems discussed above, the following main research questions were formulated.

1. What are the practices of the internal quality assurance system in Ethiopian HEIs?
2. What are the challenges of the internal quality assurance system in Ethiopian HEIs?
3. What are the strategies that can be implemented to improve the internal quality assurance system in Ethiopian HEIs?

Objectives of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to explore the practices and challenges of the internal quality assurance system in higher education institutions.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the practices of the internal quality assurance system in Ethiopian HEIs.
2. Identify challenges that the internal quality assurance system of Ethiopian HEIs encountered.
3. Identify strategies that can be implemented to improve the internal quality assurance system in Ethiopian HEIs.

Review of Related Literature

Higher Education

As anticipated, the growth of HEIs in Ethiopia has resulted in a notable rise in student enrollment and a variety of graduate and undergraduate programs in both public and private higher education establishments. Higher education in Ethiopia is being impacted by the quick growth of HEIs and students, as well as the lack of funding and human resources to provide high-quality instruction (Yirdaw, 2016). Furthermore, Negash (2006) found that the unchecked growth of the industry in comparison to available material resources and employment prospects is the primary cause of the reduction in education.

Ethiopian higher education has encountered many difficulties in its short history, such as a lack of resources, a lack of real commitment to academic freedom and institutional autonomy, programs and curricula that are unresponsive to the country's practical needs, institutions that are very conservative, and an inability to produce enough manpower to meet the country's needs (Wariyo, 2020).

Additionally, due to overcrowding and deteriorating physical facilities, limited and outdated library resources, inadequate equipment and instructional materials, poorly prepared secondary students, and a lack of academic rigor among students, higher education institutions face significant challenges in maintaining student retention and developing academic competencies, thereby ensuring educational quality. As a result, Ethiopia's poverty and other related societal issues have not been adequately addressed by the provided education and training programs (Teshome, 2003).

Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions

HEIs are confronting intense competition and growing in size and complexity. The state of higher education and its growth vary from nation to nation, and in many developing countries, it is limited (Olaleye et al., 2026). The growth of HEIs has posed serious obstacles to citizens' access to high-quality education (Dalelo, 2019).

Supporting students and continuing to educate effectively are major problems for educators. Recent initiatives concentrate on comprehending these difficulties and finding areas for development. Common methodologies in universities include employing outside examiners, conducting self-evaluations, and performing academic audits (Kumar et al., 2026), with self-assessment often favored as it empowers staff and allows for honest reflection on their work without external pressure (Materu, 2007).

Quality Assurance Mechanisms

When it comes to quality assurance, different nations use different ideas. HERQA (2006) defines quality assurance as a planned, systematic, structured, ongoing review and evaluation of all university programs, courses, instructional materials, teaching, learning, and assessment with the aim of maintaining and improving these through ongoing quality care efforts and confirming that the conditions are in place for students to meet the standards of the university and pertinent national bodies (Kumar et al., 2026).

The majority of quality assurance reviews rely on one or a combination of a few fundamental approaches, despite the fact that the techniques used in varied quality assurance reviews differ greatly (Wariyo, 2020). Self-evaluation, accreditation, peer review, quality control, and quality audit are the quality assurance procedures employed in HEIs (HERQA, 2006). When HEIs carry out institutional quality assurance activities, these procedures might be part of the internal quality assurance system (Stensaker et al., 2011). The internal quality assurance system, which includes all

quality assurance techniques used institutionally at Ethiopian HEIs, is the subject of this study.

Internal Quality Assurance in HEIs

In Ethiopia, the establishment of a formal IQA system is a recent development. This should not be interpreted as indicating that HEIs lacked systems to guarantee the caliber of their educational offerings. In actuality, institutions had their own systems in place to ensure institutional quality prior to the shift to a more structured approach (Tamrat, 2020).

The higher education proclamations of FDRE (2019) emphasized the necessity of creating an internal framework for quality assurance, the obligations of individual HEIs, and the role of external organizations such as MoE and HERQA in promoting changes towards a more robust internal quality management system. These proclamations state that an institution's IQA system should offer precise and thorough measures of quality, such as course materials, teaching-learning procedures, student evaluation, assessment, and grading methods, as well as professional development of academic staff.

In addition to creating its own quality standards, HEIs are required to conduct internal quality audits on a regular basis, monitor and address any shortcomings found, record all activities completed, and report the results to the Agency (Tamrat, 2022).

The majority of Ethiopian universities' IQA systems are plagued by a number of restrictive policy directives and serious structural issues. IQA units are typically poorly integrated into the university system, and many universities frequently exhibit shortcomings such as a lack of leadership and resource support, a lack of vision, and poorly explained procedures (Kahsay, 2012; Semela, 2011; Tamrat, 2020; Teshome, 2003).

Another problem with the IQA system, according to Tamrat (2020), is the low level of stakeholder participation at the majority of universities. Most audit reports show that employees' and students' participation in internal quality assurance procedures is limited, which could jeopardize the system's overall effectiveness.

Method

The main intent of the study was to explore the internal quality assurance system practices and challenges in higher education institutions, focusing on the improvement of quality education.

Research Design

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study because the goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the procedures and difficulties associated with the internal quality assurance system in higher education institutions. This method was chosen because it can capture variances in viewpoints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and offer detailed explanations of the topics being studied (Yin, 2016). This approach was logically chosen and applied, as analyzing the procedures and difficulties of internal quality assurance systems in HEIs is a complicated and varied process that requires the perspectives of multiple actors as well as the gathering and processing of data from numerous sources.

Data Sources

Stakeholders in HEIs, such as instructors, quality assurance directors, quality assurance experts/officers, and quality assurance coordinators, were the primary data sources of the study. The researcher also believed that these participants are front-runners and have first-hand information concerning internal quality assurance systems in HEIs. In addition to primary sources, secondary data sources such as policy documents, quality assurance reports, accreditation procedures, institutional audit reports, quality assurance frameworks, and existing literature regarding the internal quality assurance system were included where necessary. These sources supplement and provide additional insights, contextualizing the study within the existing body of knowledge about internal quality assurance systems in HEIs.

Sampling Technique

Addis Ababa University was selected using the purposive sampling technique for this study because it offers diverse research opportunities across various disciplines, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration. Moreover, conducting research in a culturally rich setting like Addis Ababa University allows for unique insights that can improve the quality and relevance of the findings. In addition, Hawassa University and Jimma University were selected on a random basis from the eight first-generation and research universities. The first-generation universities were selected purposely as research setting areas, assuming that they are well established and can provide rich data regarding internal quality assurance systems, as the study requires experienced key informants and experienced instructors. Thus, the study includes three first-generation or research universities: Addis Ababa University, Hawassa University, and Jimma University.

Quality assurance directors, experts, and coordinators were selected purposively since they are the main stakeholders regarding the quality assurance system in the HEIs,

and they are also key informants of the study. Hence, 3 quality assurance directors (one director from each university), 6 quality assurance coordinators (3 from Hawassa University and 3 from Jimma University), 2 quality assurance experts/officers (from Addis Ababa University), and 9 experienced instructors (3 from each university) have been contacted and interviewed in this study. In total, 20 participants were included in the study. To maintain confidentiality, the participants were coded as Participant 001, Participant 002, Participant 003, and so on, up to Participant 020. The data collection period was from April 2025 to June 2025.

Research Instruments

In terms of research tools, a semi-structured interview was used in this study since it offers a great deal of flexibility and may be modified based on the responses and reactions of the participants (Cohen et al., 2011). Additionally, compared to a traditional interview, it is more relaxed, natural, and informal for participants. It makes it possible for the researcher to thoroughly examine the viewpoints and experiences of stakeholders in relation to IQAS. The purpose of the interview questions was to gather pertinent information about the methods, difficulties, and approaches of IQAS in HEIs. In order to enhance the information gathered through interviews, national and international quality assurance-related literature was also consulted.

Procedures

First, the research participants were informed of the research questions. Prior to the interview, research participants received brief explanations of the interview items. Thus, the interview data were generally arranged topically and examined appropriately.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data through interviews and data from related documents were analyzed qualitatively through selecting and coding similar themes together based on the research questions and were presented in a cohesive manner. Besides, data collected from documents like audit reports, guidelines, frameworks, and other related literary works were analyzed to complement the data collected through the interview. Hence, the thematic qualitative data analysis method was used in this study.

Ethical consideration

Ethical issues pertaining to data collecting, findings distribution, and, most importantly, participant-researcher relationships are likely to arise in each study. Therefore, in this study, the researcher provided all participants with relevant research information and

explained the purpose of the investigation. The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical considerations that must be made while conducting research. Additionally, every source used in this research was cited and reported in accordance with APA guidelines (*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 2020).

Results and Discussions

The study's findings are summed up under the following four major categories, which are focused on the procedures and difficulties of the internal quality assurance system in higher education institutions.

Establishment of Internal Quality Assurance System in HEIs

The Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS) was established in Ethiopian HEIs after the introduction and establishment of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), now called the Education Training Authority (ETA), the governing body that oversees the quality of higher education institutions in 2003 following the decision of the Higher Education Proclamation No. 351/2003 (FDRE, 2003).

Later in 2009, the Higher Education Proclamation No. 650/2009 was enacted, mandating that HEIs establish a reliable institutional or internal quality assurance system to improve educational standards (FDRE, 2009). Since its adoption, the majority of Ethiopian HEIs have initiated the development of IQAS aimed at enhancing the quality of education at the institutional level.

The establishment of the IQAS at Addis Ababa University began in 2012 with the establishment of the Office for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement. Staffed by specialists in educational management, information systems, and quality management, this initiative marked a significant milestone in the university's commitment to academic excellence (AAU, 2012). As the institution aspires to be among Africa's top graduate and research universities, safeguarding the quality of its programs is both essential and strategic, especially given the breadth of study programs it manages. Moreover, it is widely believed that Addis Ababa University served as a model for other Ethiopian HEIs, many of which subsequently began developing their own internal quality assurance systems based on its experience.

Across Ethiopian HEIs, internal quality assurance systems exist under various names and organizational structures. In the three universities sampled, IQAS is referred to differently, such as Quality Assurance and Academic Standards, Quality Enhancement and Standards, and Quality Assurance and Risk Management. With regard to accountability, quality assurance is accountable either to the president or academic vice president in Ethiopian HEIs. However, according to the new autonomous

structure, quality assurance in Addis Ababa University is accountable to the university's governing board. This shift grants the office greater authority and independence in overseeing academic quality, minimizing executive interference. The autonomous arrangement is expected to empower more robust execution and control over educational standards and is widely regarded as best practice that other Ethiopian HEIs may emulate.

Although the IQAS is structured at some levels in the HEIs, responsible groups at every level have not been quite aware of what type of quality is needed and how it should be handled. It's not properly explained, guided, and put in place (participant 011, June 2025).

The interview participants were asked how the IQAS was established, how it works, and the reasons behind its establishment. The interviews conducted with participants regarding the establishment and functioning of the IQAS revealed varying levels of understanding and knowledge about its historical background and significance.

One of the participants reacted that "I am not very clear about the historical issue of this, how the quality assurance systems, especially for higher education, were established" (participant 001, May 2025). Besides, another participant added that "to be honest, I don't have explicit information on the historical background of quality assurance practices in our education system" (participant 003, May 2025). "

In addition, one participant added that:

Honestly speaking, I don't recall when the Internal Quality Assurance System was established at our institution, but I know that even without having a structure as a Quality Assurance System, in one way or another, there has been a unit responsible for assuring quality (participant 010 June, 2025).

It is unlikely to hear from key informants that they really do not know the historical background and establishment of the IQAS in Ethiopian HEIs working as a quality assurance director, expert, and coordinator. This implies that less attention is given to IQAS and/or showcases a lack of awareness on the topic.

In addition, participant coded P018 added that "I think there is not a fair, maybe, understanding or equal understanding and equal perception about quality." Apart from its establishment, understanding of quality assurance by itself is under question among stakeholders in higher education institutions.

The researcher asked again whether the university has established the quality assurance office by its own or by other external forces' direction. However, one of the

key informants coded 002 responded that "...there was no external force in the establishment of the quality assurance office in our institution...it was the university's plan to set up the office." Although the reality behind the establishment of the system is that HERQA and MoE made the HEIs establish their own institutional quality assurance system as per the Proclamation No. 351/2003 (FDRE, 2003). In addition, the primary purpose of the Office for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement is to provide leadership in the coordination of university-wide efforts to improve student learning and enhance institutional effectiveness.

The data from key informants depict that there is a lack of clarity and historical context regarding the establishment of the IQAS in HEIs. For instance, participant 001 expressed uncertainty about the historical aspects of the IQAS, indicating a gap in knowledge regarding the origins and development of QAS in higher education. This sentiment was echoed by participant 003, who admitted to lacking explicit information about the historical background of quality assurance practices within the higher education system.

Furthermore, differences in perspectives can be attributed to a lack of awareness and clear working guidelines with commitment of the stakeholders. Mensah (2022) believes that the implementation of an internal quality assurance system can only be effective if all members of the institution are aware of it and if all members are involved.

This issue can be the result of less communication of quality assurance guidelines, as one of the research participants raised as follows:

Quality assurance policies and guidelines put on paper, you know, are not quite communicated to the concerning individuals at the departmental level, college level, and other stakeholders. They do not know this, you know; they are not that oriented. There is less orientation on this, on the need for quality assurance and how to improve, and on how to improve at the level of the department, the level of the academy commission, and all the way through to the head of the university system (Participant 019, June 2025).

To sum up, the result indicates a mix of awareness and knowledge gaps among participants regarding the historical context and establishment of the IQAS, with some participants being able to pinpoint specific milestones while others expressed uncertainty.

Practices of Internal Quality Assurance System in HEIs

As the establishment of a quality assurance system differs, the practical implementation of the system also differs in HEIs. For instance, at AAU, quality

assurance is established at the institutional level with one director and two experts. In other HEIs, quality assurance is termed as "a one-man office" with quality assurance coordinators at the college level. Having a minimum number of directors, experts, and coordinators at the top level of HEIs, it is difficult to practically implement the internal quality assurance system.

The researchers asked how internal quality assurance is practiced in their institution, and one of the key informants said that:

Institutionally, we do have quality assurance mechanisms. In addition to the previous HERQA's 10 focus areas of quality audit, we had three extra focus areas, and in total our institution had 13 focus areas for the quality audit mechanism; however, according to the revised ETA institutional accreditation, there are only 7 focus areas that our institution also applies (participant 010, June 2025).

These focus areas are actually prepared by HERQA/ETA so that HEIs are usually checked and examined for their quality of education, which is all about the institutional quality audit and applied through a kind of checklist, which is done once every four years. But quality assurance is beyond using a checklist; it needs comprehensive stages like inputs, processes, and outputs.

Another key informant explained that

Although we have the system at the institutional level, we do not have the system that reaches the low level of academic units, but we have tried to prepare a structure that can be implemented at the low level. And the structure was approved but not implemented yet (participant 011, June 2025).

The first key informant again explained the practices of quality assurance as follows:

We also made a program audit, a teaching-learning audit, and a research audit in our institutions based on the thirteen focus areas. This internal audit was done in our institution last year for the first time; however, there was a trial before, which seems to be a kind of supervision (participant 001, May 2025).

In addition, another key informant coded 010 added, "...there are other practices, for example, preparing guidelines, a PhD tracer, a ten-year strategic plan, and others." However, as the data from the quality audit report of AAU reveals, there is no quality assurance office at the college level that works to assure the quality of education provided to students of the college in coordination with the quality assurance office organized at the university level.

Another participant added:

The theory of quality assurance on paper may be crystal clear, but that crystal-clear policy guideline can only be put into practice by practical personalities, because theory and practice are very difficult unless there are people who could understand that and make it work on the ground (participant 011, June 2025).

This implies that while quality assurance policies may be well-defined in theory, their successful implementation relies heavily on individuals who possess the practical skills and understanding to translate those policies into action. This highlights a crucial gap between theoretical frameworks and real-world application, emphasizing that effective quality assurance requires capable personnel who can navigate this transition.

And coming back to the respondent's idea, teaching, learning, and assessment are in one of the ten focus areas that internal and external quality audit officers use in maintaining and improving the quality of education. Hence, from the respondent's point of view, instructors know little about quality assurance practices and challenges.

In most audit reports, the External Quality Assurance (EQA) team reached important main conclusions that directly related to the research question raised, but not limited to the following:

There is no organized quality assurance system and assigned personnel at each level.

- Most HEIs do not have a quality assurance policy.
- There is no systematically organized quality assurance endeavor and activities.
- Most HEIs lack a mechanism for the identification and dissemination of good practices.

Furthermore, an examination of every audit report reveals that HEIs understand the need for ensuring quality within the establishments. The main issue is the incomplete quality assurance system or methodology. The majority of HEIs that have been audited lack methods for gathering information that may be utilized to assess the institutions' quality (Yirdaw, 2016).

For example, according to the key informant coded 017, only two colleges from Addis Ababa University (College of Health Sciences and Ethiopian Institute of Architecture, Building Construction, and City Development) have assigned quality assurance coordinators to run the quality assurance system at their respective colleges. On the contrary, as per the interview data, all colleges at Hawassa University and Jimma University have quality assurance coordinators at all colleges. In general, although

there are different mechanisms and procedures of quality assurance at the institutional level, it is less likely in practice. Yet, with respect to establishing a quality assurance system, it is required to work more strongly.

Challenges that hinder Internal Quality Assurance System in HEIs

As the response from the respondents showed, there are different factors that affect the practical implementation of IQAS in Ethiopian HEIs, especially in the sampled institutions. For example, one of the participants said that:

I think there are a number of factors that affect the internal quality assurance system in the university where I am currently teaching. The students' background, the facilities available, the quality of teachers, and the methodology they employ can be some of the challenges that hinder the IQAS and quality of education as well (participant 001, May 2025).

Quality of education and its assurance need rigorous and comprehensive processes to bring the intended quality of education and competent graduates in the job market. However, due to a number of factors in the country's education system, as per the data from participants, bringing quality of education and applying the IQAS in HEIs is quite challenging. However, the majority of the research participants reacted that there are promising progresses currently happening in their institution.

Another participant reacted that:

When I come to the disabling factors that hinder the implementation of the internal quality assurance system, number one, there is no freedom or autonomy. Okay? The internal quality assurance system is working under a controlled environment. Okay? The other is that there is no resource. No resource. Even if there are no rooms (Participant 006, May 2025).

This participant added:

Look, I'm working in my own office. Okay? Therefore, you know, resources should be there. Autonomy should be there. Freedom should be there. Okay? Sometimes, this internal quality assurance body will be thrown under other wings.

According to this participant, internal quality assurance should be autonomous with full freedom and settled with a good environment and equipped with necessary resources to execute the quality assurance system and to bring quality of education to HEIs. Hence, IQAS in HEIs lacks authority, and it is difficult to bring change in the

system unless the system is stand-alone by itself without the power interference of university presidents.

In addition to this, another participant, 002, added:

Nowadays, it seems that technology has eased the problem of educational facilities like books, as it has made them available online. However, the online materials are not as convenient to read as the hard copies that earlier students used to rely on. Besides, the students are more attracted to movies and other non-academic online sources, which take much of their time. So, the time given to their academic activities is low (participant 002, May, 2025).

On the other hand, participant coded 002 added another significant effect, which can involve the greater amount of poor quality of education, which reads, "The methodology that teachers use these days also has some impact on the quality of education. Instructors mostly rely on PPT (PowerPoint presentations) to cover their portion without worrying whether students have understood the lesson or not." This implies that the methodology of teaching is very important in improving the quality of education if it is appropriately used, and it can again lead to poor quality of education if it is applied as the respondent mentioned above.

In addition to the factors raised by participant 001, there are additional factors like "the social and economic status of the academic staff. Low salary, which is not enough to cover their expenses, and lack of housing and incentives contribute to poor service and thereby provision of poor-quality education."

Another participant coded 012 replied to the factors affecting the internal quality assurance system and quality of education as follows:

Existing curricula is the most significant factor. Besides, since higher education is the most essential degree of education, the manpower resources, problems, and their solutions must be quality-based. And the future of the country depends largely on the high quality of people groomed in the organization of higher education. And factors contributing to this case are the level of competency of instructors, curricula, and the standards of student intake, which are important for the quality of higher education (participant 012, June, 2025).

Moreover, participant coded 010 also added some important factors that affect the quality of education as follows:

I believe the graduates, the research outputs, and the community services rendered are the expected end results of higher education where the quality of

the education could be assessed. So, there are input, process, and output factors that could affect quality, which ends in all three. Factors that affect the quality of graduates could be the inputs, like the student characteristics at the entry-level, the guidance offered, the motivation of the learner, the availability of resources necessary for learning, the relevance of the content, the methodology of learning used, etc. In the research and community service area, again, you can think of the process and output factors (participant 010, May, 2025).

The issues raised by the participants were also supported by the report of the External Quality Assurance (EQA) made in one of the sampled HEIs, and the team recommended HEIs for the enhancement of the quality of education that they:

Improve the availability of working equipment, make laboratory manuals for available labs, make enough offices with the required resources for all academic staff, ensure the functionality of laboratory equipment, ensure that students are getting practical training according to the curriculum, work with the respective organ to improve the financial system of the institution and allocation of financial resources, and work with the respective organs of the institution to establish a system for monitoring proper resource utilization, maintenance, and updating.

This suggests that the improvement of high-quality education in HEIs is influenced by a variety of factors. Additionally, the caliber of the personnel who instruct and assist students has a significant impact on the quality of an educational program. Institutions should make sure that a method for ensuring that all new hires possess the requisite level of competence is part of their hiring and appointment processes. For its programs to be implemented effectively, every HEI needs to have an adequate number of staff members (HERQA, 2006).

Besides, another participant was asked, "Can we say the system has improved the quality of education?" The participant replied:

It is a bit challenging. As I said earlier, a quality assurance system is mandatory for any program. But due to practical aspects or factors that are related to implementing the auditing system, we can say the quality of the education is still at stake. So, because we are not working on quality issues properly and then making the necessary assessments on the qualities of our programs, the educational quality is still stagnant, so there is no improvement. (Participant 020, June 2025).

To sum up, based on the interview data collected from key participants, one can understand that the quality assurance system in HEIs is certainly a challenging task where there are no clear guidelines, lack of awareness among stakeholders, lack of autonomy or freedom, lack of necessary resources, and no conducive working environment and conditions.

Strategies that can be implemented to improve the internal quality assurance system in HEIs

Regarding strategies, one of the key informants responded as follows:

I think persistence in what has begun is very important. If quality assurance and enhancement activities continue to be emphasized, if raising awareness of the importance of quality maintenance and quality assurance continues, it can become a culture of the system, and that can contribute a lot. But there is still confusion in terms of how it is perceived (participant 003, April 2025).

According to this key informant, for some years quality assurance used to be part of the academic wing, but recently it has been relegated to the administrative wing, and some of the university communities were complaining. This issue signals the confusion and maybe lack of clarity and understanding of what quality assurance is in an academic setting like this one.

And the participant suggested the following:

So, clarifying those things is very important, I think, and preparing strong guiding documents, maybe procedures that can be applied across all our higher learning institutions, will help us to improve the practice as a nation. Sometimes institutions try to develop their own, but national-level improvement can be achieved if it is applied across universities, not in one or a few universities; that's what I feel (participant 003, April 2025).

This implies emphasizing the importance of creating clear and comprehensive guiding documents and standardized procedures for internal quality assurance systems in HEIs is highly recommended. By establishing a cohesive framework, stakeholders can enhance the overall quality of education and ensure that best practices are consistently implemented throughout the country. This underscores the need for collaboration and shared standards to foster improvement in higher education as a whole.

In addition, another participant added:

It is impossible to bring changes of quality with the limited human power of quality assurance experts. Hence, in addition to the framework, we asked the concerned bodies to stretch or expand the structure from top to bottom to the department level, although it has been left unanswered. Currently, there is not any chain that links the quality assurance office with the department-level implementers since the structure by itself wasn't allowed to go ahead by top managers.

According to this key informant, it is also difficult to implement an internal quality assurance system in HEIs, which is hindered by insufficient human resources dedicated to quality assurance. The participant highlights the need for a more robust organization that connects quality assurance offices with departmental implementers. Without this connection, efforts to improve quality are likely to be ineffective. The lack of support from top management further complicates the situation, suggesting that leadership must be more proactive in facilitating the necessary structural changes. Hence, to assure the quality assurance system, it is important to establish a well-defined chain of responsibility and adequate staffing to enable effective quality assurance practices at all levels of HEIs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The study reveals that there are a lack of clarities and differences of perspectives regarding the historical development and establishment of the internal quality assurance system in higher education institutions. Most respondents expressed uncertainty about the historical aspects of the internal quality assurance system, indicating a gap in knowledge regarding the development and establishment of quality assurance systems in higher education. Differences in perspectives can be attributed to a lack of awareness and a lack of clear working guidelines that are supposed to be established and distributed to all stakeholders down to the low-level executing units.

Besides, the study found that there was also a sense of ambiguity and a lack of clear information and instructions about the quality assurance system in HEIs. This indicates a major lack of communication and cooperation in terms of quality assurance at the implementation level. This also implies that, despite the presence of quality assurance structures and coordinators at institutions, there was a lack of a shared understanding of quality and quality culture inside the institution.

With regard to practical implementation of the internal quality assurance system, there are a number of promising efforts taking place in HEIs. There are efforts to monitor the teaching and learning processes, review and accredit academic programs, and

assess research outputs. However, the practical implementation lacks consistency and stability, and changes intended to happen due to the establishment of the system are very minimal in HEIs, as the stakeholders are rushing with superficial activities.

Internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions can be affected by numerous factors. As the finding of this study reveals, it can be affected due to lack of availability of qualified, committed, motivated, and professionally competent staff; students with poor interest, motivation, and engagement towards their learning; absence of visionary, committed, competent, and motivated leadership with a certain level of autonomy; unavailability of a conducive and attractive learning environment; and lack of a strong monitoring and evaluation system. The quality assurance system in Ethiopian HEIs is not well structured, neither top-to-bottom nor bottom-to-top.

Moreover, the quality of an educational program depends strongly on the quality of the staff who provide teaching and student support. This implies that for the purpose of improving the quality of education and its assurance system, no single method or system improves the quality of education, but applying all necessary mechanisms would bring changes to the quality of education. That is why quality assurance needs to be comprehensive in nature and needs the involvement of all stakeholders. Thus, to see the working internal quality assurance system in higher education institutions, the structure of the system should be established up to the department or program level. In addition, all stakeholders in the system need to be committed to implementing the system.

Recommendations

- Quality assurance should be everybody's business. And in order to ensure that the government and the related stakeholders should pave ways to enhance the motivation and the commitment of the working class. That means the academic staff, the students, and the admin staff should be motivated to realize and, above all, fulfill all the necessary resources as much as possible.
- There should be strong guiding documents and frameworks that can be applied across all higher education institutions to improve the practical implementation of the internal quality assurance system.
- Establishing an autonomous and independent internal quality assurance system in higher education institutions is very important to come up with intended changes in the entire quality assurance system.
- Among the many crucial actions to take into account are enhancing the quality of teaching and research through ongoing professional education in teaching methods, action research, and teaching and learning evaluation.

- For a quality assurance system to be implemented successfully, all system members must have a professional commitment and be empowered to encourage dedication.
- To mobilize the commitment of all stakeholders, especially academic staff, in the implementation process, it is crucial that national and institutional quality assurance programs, policies, procedures, mechanisms, etc. undergo additional discussion, communication, and promotion.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all participants, including quality assurance directors, coordinators, experts, and senior academic staff, for their time and cooperation in providing required data concerning the issue of internal quality assurance systems in Ethiopian higher education institutions. We also would like to thank all administrative personnel directly or indirectly involved in the study from Addis Ababa University, Hawassa University, and Jimma University.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding

The authors did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies or organizations.

Ethical Approval

This research project is approved by 'The Institutional Review Board' of the Center for Educational Research, Addis Ababa University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before collecting data.

Authors' Contribution

1. Girma Awaki Feyera (corresponding author) – conceptualization, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, and writing original draft preparation
2. Belete Kebede Mebratu – supervision, validation, writing review and editing
3. Firdissa Jebessa Aga – supervision, validation, writing review and editing

All authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript

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