

# Higher Education in Ethiopia: Expansion, Quality Assurance and Institutional Autonomy

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## Abstract

*This article chronicles the key challenges facing Ethiopia as it embarks on an ambitious, ideologically-driven and aggressive expansion of its higher education system in an effort to address its national goals of economic growth and poverty reduction. It is argued that the urge for higher education expansion has placed undue pressures particularly on the state of quality enhancement and autonomy of universities. As government pressures for more expansion mounted, universities struggled with dwindling per student budgetary allocations, shortage of qualified staff, inadequate supply of much needed inputs and the erosion of their autonomy. It is suggested that while higher education expansion remains an important goal for Ethiopia for many years to come, a reasonable balance should be struck between the ideological aspects of expansion and the practical realities of limited resources, heightened concerns about the quality of student learning and the autonomy of universities.*

## Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed proactive measures by many national governments around the world to transform their higher education from 'élite' to 'mass' systems. Massification has now become a 'universal phenomenon' (Palfreyman *et al.*, 2011). Yet, despite some gains, massification also posed unprecedented challenges. Often, as resources did not keep pace with increasing enrolments, it has been all the more daunting for higher education institutions to maintain standards and quality. The resulting conundrum created the need for greater state control of higher education in the interest of efficiency and accountability. As a consequence, governments started to 'intervene in matters of institutional autonomy by setting rules to secure the quality (assurance) of higher education [and] by defining how institutions should be governed' (Huisman, 2007, p. 220). With government interference, however, two

major problems surfaced. First, government-initiated quality assurance initiatives have often focused on 'accountability and compliance' leaving aside 'continuous quality improvement of the student experience' (Harvey, 2005, p. 273). Second, continuous attacks on institutional autonomy by governments have left academics in dilemma as they are 'progressively pushed from a position of professionals into that of employees, the new professionals being the managers, academics or not' (Amaral and Rosa, 2011, p. 210).

Ethiopia has recently embarked on an aggressive expansion of its higher education system in a manner unparalleled in its sixty or so years of higher education history. The speed with which expansion has occurred has been described as 'intoxicating' (Reisberg and Rumbley, 2010). In just a span of a decade, enrolment in undergraduate programmes grew with an alarming rate of more than 1200 per cent. Within the last five years alone undergraduate and postgraduate enrolment also grew with an annual average rate of 22 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2011). This is even in the presence of significant underreporting by public universities and an apparent lack of enrolment data from some private institutions (Ministry of Education, 2011). The main thrust for expansion is arguably to be found in a political commitment that has discursively linked widening participation with the country's development goals of economic growth, poverty reduction and the need to produce highly skilled manpower required to raise the country's competitiveness in the global sphere. Besides, there is unwavering political commitment to expand higher education as a means to redress past shortcomings marred by regional disparities in rates of participation. Ethiopia's politically inspired renaissance rhetoric, which has as its aim to redress Ethiopia's past tainted by poverty, famine and low level of economic development, and its goal of becoming a middle income country by 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2010) have also acted as important drives for recent transformations in the higher education sub-sector.

Yet, despite these lofty aims, the urge for enrolment expansion has sparked a public tumult for falling educational standards (Semela, 2011) and heightened concerns that such a move has led to the erosion of institutional autonomy (Akalu, 2013). This article argues that, as it stands, a major problem plaguing the Ethiopian higher education system is an ideologically driven massive enrolment expansion that has thus far marginalised attention to the quality of student learning and institutional autonomy. There is no denying the fact that there is a clear and unwavering commitment on the part of the Ethiopian government to expand higher education opportunities (Semela and Ayalew, 2008;

Ashcroft, 2010). Yet a lot still remains to be done to strengthen, create and, in some cases, maintain appropriate external and internal mechanisms through which the quality of the student experience could be regularly monitored; and to do so without damaging the autonomy of universities. Current trends, however, suggest otherwise. On one hand, the state is increasingly becoming reluctant to enhance the capacity of the existing external quality assurance agency and largely undermined its status as an autonomous entity. Further, despite legislating institutional autonomy to universities, the state has failed to live up to its promises. Boundaries continue to be transgressed. External interferences by the state operated as a disincentive to long-standing internal quality monitoring processes as these become devalued in the 'command and control' political culture (Saint, 2004) that has largely marginalised academe. On the other hand, universities, although overwhelmed with huge enrolment bulges, appear to be largely ambivalent about embracing the quality agenda. They have been less than diligent in designing procedures and systems for monitoring their own internal operation and lingered in building the capacity of their own quality enhancement units (Semela, 2011).

### **Global trends in higher education expansion, quality assurance and institutional autonomy**

#### *Expansion*

Mass higher education has become a global phenomenon. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, enrolment in higher education grew faster than any other region in the world in the last four decades (UNESCO UIS, 2010). Although a movement from élite to mass higher education in Trow's (1972) terms does not characterise developments in all these countries, there has undeniably been a substantial growth of the higher education sector in many countries in Africa (Mohamedbhai, 2008). The rationale for recent expansion of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa is attributable to a confluence of factors, some peculiar to the individual country's social, historical, cultural and economic context and others in response to globalisation. However, it is hard to refute that much of this development has been precipitated by increased recognition of the positive associations drawn between increased investment in higher education and higher socio-economic returns. Higher education is now portrayed as crucial for the creation of 'democratic, knowledge based economies and societies'; as well as meeting essential development goals such as poverty reduction, sustainable development, fulfilment of

the millennium development goals and 'Education for All' (World Bank, 2002; UNESCO, 2009).

Thus, as the role and purpose of higher education featured prominently at the international level by multilateral organisations notably by the World Bank, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a growing number of developing countries began to expand their higher education system as an explicit attempt to meet their development goals and partly as a means for gaining national and international legitimacy. A glance at higher education policies in some sub-Saharan African countries indicates that higher education is discursively constructed as a means of preparing the youth to the world of work and attaining higher-level skills and competencies needed for the knowledge-based economy, thereby enhancing these countries' competitiveness in a globalised world. On the other hand, since the early 2000s, the role of multilateral agencies in reconstructing and disseminating the assumed benefits of higher education to economic growth and poverty reduction cannot be underestimated; and these convictions have been quite influential in driving enrolment expansion in many Sub-Saharan African countries. The World Bank and UNESCO have been at the forefront of advocating the favourable consequences of increased investment in higher education to a country's socio-economic development. It is worth noting that in dramatic reversal of its longstanding positions, the World Bank (2002), in its policy document on higher education, *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education* advised member countries to channel more public resources to their higher education systems while simultaneously advising them to pay attention to matters of quality, efficiency and accountability.

In fact, the World Bank (2002, p. xxiii) linked underinvestment in higher education to social problems including 'reduced ability of a country to compete effectively in global and regional economies; a widening of economic and social disparities; declines in the quality of life, in health status and in life expectancy; an increase in unavoidable public expenditures on social welfare programs; and a deterioration of social cohesion'. UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education (2009) similarly encouraged all member states to pay particular attention to their higher education systems. Thus, arguably, shifts in the World Bank's position and the normative rationalities offered in favour of increased expansion of higher education by UNESCO and the donor community, while at the same time emphasising value for money,

have been among the driving forces for recent increased emphasis and expansion efforts of higher education in developing countries.

It needs to be stated that although higher education expansion remains an important policy objective for many countries, it remains that widening participation in higher education almost always poses critical challenges to any country. The following sub-sections explore two key problems often associated with expansion of higher education: quality and institutional autonomy.

### *Quality assurance*

Quality assurance is defined as ‘a planned and systematic review process of an institution or program to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced’ (Materu, 2007, p. 3). Worldwide the urge to attend to matters of quality and quality assurance in higher education through an external agency came about in 1980s and in response to several trends. The driving forces include a shift in public attitude towards viewing higher education as a public good rather than a private good (Barnett, 1992); expanding student enrolments (Green, 1994; Harvey, 2005; OECD, 2008), value for money drives and accountability (Harvey, 2005); the entry of private providers into the higher education market (Morey, 2004) and the need to make higher education more relevant to a country’s socio-economic needs (Harvey, 2005).

Many sub-Saharan countries undergoing massive expansion have now found it necessary to put in place quality assurance as a strategic priority in their higher education systems. They did this, as elsewhere, by setting up external quality assurance agencies at the national level. Between 2000–2007, for example, 16 countries established national quality agencies (Materu, 2007). Although the reasons for establishing national external quality assurance agencies, particularly in the African context is a result of a confluence of factors, they are primarily driven by declining levels of higher education quality and the arrival of private higher education providers and the concomitant need to regulate their activities (Materu, 2007). Whatever the rationales, some scholars see the emergence of quality régimes across the world as reflecting the legitimate concerns of governments and other stakeholders (Harris and Webb, 2010).

However, approaches to quality assurance in many countries are equally criticised as becoming a ‘political technology’ and a form of Foucauldian ‘neo-liberal governmentality’ (Shore and Wright, 1999), emphasising compliance and accountability (Hodson and Thomas,

2003), creating a ‘compliance culture and a command economy in higher education’ (Morley, 2003, p. 162) and focusing on surveillance and control rather than improvement (Shore and Wright, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Hoecht, 2006). In Britain, for example, quality régimes created several problems including excessive demands on institutions, violation of academic autonomy and freedom, the fostering of a ‘compliance culture’ and creation of ‘hard managerialism’ (Watson, 1995, p. 328). That said, it remains that only little is known about the impact of external quality assurance on the improvement of student learning and the quality of student experience—the ultimate purpose of quality assurance (Harvey, 2005; Materu, 2007).

### *Institutional autonomy*

Institutional autonomy is commonly understood to refer to the freedom of universities to manage their own affairs without direction, or influence, or interference from outside actors, particularly from governments. In effect, institutional autonomy refers to self-government by the university (Taiwo, 2011). Institutional autonomy does not mean the absence of external control but a matter of empowering ‘institutions in a responsible way’ (Salmi, 2007, p. 241). It is argued that autonomy ‘should not remain a concept that exists only on paper ... [neither should it be] an excuse for the State to retreat from its obligations’ (Salmi, 2007, p. 241).

As is evident in many countries, higher education expansion has posed new challenges on institutional autonomy. This occurs because attempts at external quality assurance during periods of expansion often translate into the imposition of external standards of performance on universities and these operate against existing norms of self-regulation. Thus, it is no wonder that a crucial issue ‘in many reform and change initiatives that has taken place worldwide is the need for increased institutional autonomy’ (Stensaker and Harvey, 2011, p. 1).

However, with the arrival of the audit culture (Power, 1997), ‘[t]he pendulum of authority in higher education has swung from the academics to managers and bureaucrats, with significant impact on the university’ (Altbach *et al.*, 2009, p. xiii). Writing in the European context, some scholars argued that there have been moves by governments since the early 1980’s to provide more autonomy to universities (van Vaught and Westerheijden, 1994; Huisman, 2007) while ‘steering at a distance’. However, this has not been the experience of many African countries at least in practical terms. In fact, it can be argued that the reverse has been true in many sub-Saharan African

countries (Taiwo, 2011). Often, attacks on institutional autonomy are masked in the name of accountability. According to Shore and Wright (1999, p. 557), accountability remains a worthwhile goal both on rational and democratic grounds, however a new form of coercive and disabling accountability emerged in recent decades that elided accountability with policing, reducing professional relations to inspectable templates and, above all, introducing disciplinary mechanisms associated with neo-liberal governmentality.

### **Ethiopia: the national context**

With an area of about 1.10 million sq. kms. and a population of close to 85 million in 2011 (CSA, 2013), Ethiopia is one of the largest and most populous countries in Africa. It is one of the least developing economies in the world with a *per capita* income of just US\$370 in 2013 (World Bank, 2013). According to recent data released by the World Bank (2013), about 30 per cent of the Ethiopian population live below the national poverty line. About 85 per cent of the Ethiopian population live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Agriculture comprised 47.7 per cent of the Ethiopian GDP in 2010. With a comparatively small level of industrialisation, comprising only 14.3 per cent of GDP, Ethiopia relies heavily on imported technology for much of its infrastructure development. In recent years, Ethiopia managed to revitalise its economy quite remarkably. Currently, it is 'one of the fastest growing economies in sub-Saharan Africa' (Joshi and Verspoor, 2013, p. xi) with real gross domestic product (GDP) growth 'at or near double-digit levels since 2003' (Joshi and Verspoor, 2013, p. xxi).

Education in Ethiopia is at crossroads. Two decades ago, Ethiopia had one of the lowest enrolment rates in primary education in sub-Saharan Africa (only 20 per cent of gross enrolment ratio), not to mention low rates at secondary and higher education. Since then, however, it has managed to construct an education system that has the capacity to enrol 85 per cent of the eligible primary age group in 2010. The present structure of education in Ethiopia consist of eight years of primary education, followed by two years of general secondary education (Grades 9–10) along with a parallel system of technical vocational education (10+1, 10+2), two years of pre-college preparatory education (grades 11–12) and 3–6 years of higher education for undergraduate study. There are currently close to 17 million students enrolled at the primary level, nearly two million students in secondary education and a total of 467,843 students in both public and private higher education institutions (Table 1). Presently only 36 per cent of Ethiopia's adult

*TABLE 1*  
Enrolment in Ethiopian education system

	Male	Female	Total	%f
Primary	8,779,088	7,939,023	16,718,111	47
Secondary	976,822	773,312	1,750,134	44
Higher education	344,137	123,706	467,843	26

Source: Ministry of Education, *Annual Statistical Abstract*, 2011.

population is literate (Joshi and Verspoor, 2013). Despite Ethiopia's recent success in enrolling a large majority of the eligible cohort in its primary sub-sector and the progress it made in expanding its secondary and higher education system, the quality of education throughout the system is still suspect (World Bank, 2004; Nega, 2009).

#### *Higher education expansion in Ethiopia*

Although a western-type secular modern education in Ethiopia began about a century ago, the country established its first higher education institution in 1950 with the opening of the University College of Addis Ababa, now known as Addis Ababa University (Wagaw, 1990). This was soon followed by the establishment of several specialised colleges. In 1985, Ethiopia had managed to upgrade one of its public colleges to a university status and in the subsequent years up until 2000, the country had maintained only two public universities and a small number of public colleges. No private higher education institution existed in Ethiopia prior to 1991 partly due to the low level of demand for higher education during the imperial time and, from the 1974–1991, due to the socialist policy that prohibited any private entrepreneurial activities in the education sector. The overthrow of the military government in 1991, however, ushered in a new era of educational development. Education was soon to become a top priority of the new government. However, even within the education sector, higher education was accorded a very low priority until the early 2000s compared to primary education. From the early 2000s onwards, however, interest in higher education quickly became apparent. With a political commitment to redress the 'lost years' of Ethiopian past, the Ethiopian government started to expand higher education at an alarming speed. Thus, in the public sector alone, seven colleges were upgraded to a university status since 2000, 13 new universities were established since 2005; nine new universities are under construction since 2007. In addition, a country that had no private



higher education institution at all before 1991 now boasts 59 fully accredited private higher education institutions, not to mention those still awaiting full accreditation (Ministry of Education, 2011). As a consequence, undergraduate enrolment in public and private higher education institutions skyrocketed, growing over 1200 per cent in the past decade (from 34,313 in 2000–2001 to 447,693 in 2010–2011). Over a course of five years alone (from 2006–2007 to 2010–2011), a 55 per cent growth in undergraduate enrolment and a 65 per cent rise in postgraduate enrolment had been attained. In the 2010–2011 academic year, Ethiopia's higher education system had a combined enrolment of 467,843 students. Of these, 83 per cent were enrolled in public universities (Ministry of Education, 2011). Currently the gross enrolment ratio is a little less than six per cent, compared to only 0.8 per cent in 1991 (Ministry of Education, 2010; Semela, 2011).

Higher education expansion in Ethiopia has ideological rationalities and lines of argument as it is now discursively linked to Ethiopia's short-term goal of becoming a middle-income country by 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2010). Official discursive practices in Ethiopia also relate higher education expansion to economic growth, poverty reduction and production of high-level workforce to increase Ethiopia's competitiveness in the global sphere.

Undoubtedly, higher education expansion in Ethiopia is not without its benefits. Research thus far has pointed to improved opportunities for access to students, reduction in regional disparities in participation, increasing participation of female students and diversification of fields of study in universities (Tessema, 2009; Semela, 2011). On the negative side, expansion had brought with itself a number of problems. An often-raised criticism from some observers is that expansion has led to a mismatch between an ever-growing number of students and availability and supply of resources (Ashcroft, 2010). Many old and new universities found themselves in desperate conditions as they lack the physical infrastructure to accommodate an ever-growing number of students. Overcrowded classrooms have become the norm rather than the exception. Student-faculty ratio more than doubled in just six years (from 13.7 in 2002–2003 to 28 in 2008–2009) (Semela, 2011). Over-engagement and cases of deprofessionalisation of staff are also reported (Tessema, 2009). Basic inputs such as furniture, ICT, laboratory chemicals are in short supply. Besides, universities do not have the most up-to-date books and journals. There is no inter-library loan system in Ethiopia. Poor Internet connectivity is even further complicated by frequent power interruptions. In addition, per unit costs have not kept

pace with growing student numbers. For example, between the period 2000–2001 to 2004–2005, per student costs decreased sharply from around US\$2,434 to about US\$820 (Semela, 2011). All these created undue pressures on the quality provision of education. Further, to the extent that the current rate of expansion persists, Ethiopia will have to continue to rely largely on multilateral and donor support to finance its higher education system and perhaps at the cost of its cherished development priorities.

Expansion has also created the difficulty of obtaining highly experienced academics for the newly established universities. Most existing academic staff in these universities are employed centrally by the Ministry of Education immediately after graduation from bachelor's degrees. They are young and inexperienced and are often inundated with heavy teaching loads and administrative responsibilities. By 2010, it was estimated that 70 per cent of all academic staff in Ethiopian universities had only bachelor's qualifications (Ashcroft, 2010). 'The government currently depends on international aid as well as expatriate faculty to fill in the many gaps that result from the rapid growth of higher education. But even with aid, funding is insufficient to address the enormous needs of this nascent system' (Reisberg and Rumbley, 2010).

It is in some ways tempting to go beyond the higher education sector to see the other ramifications of the current higher education expansion effort. An issue of critical concern associated with the recent expansion of higher education is that it operated at the expense of primary education. Given Ethiopia's low level of development and its agrarian economic base, there are ample reasons to argue that primary education is indispensable for meeting many of Ethiopia's important social objectives such as increased agricultural productivity, poverty reduction and maternal health, to cite just a few. In recent years, however, two trends become more apparent in Ethiopia: (1) a significant decrease in the percentage allocation of the education budget to primary education (from 60 per cent in 2001–2002 to 52 per cent in 2010) and, (2) a more than double increase in the percentage allocations of the budget to higher education (from 11 per cent to 24 per cent during the same period) (Ministry of Education, 1997, 2005). In fact, a recent study on public education spending in Ethiopia sponsored by the United Kingdom Department of International Development has brought to light the fact that higher education absorbed 40 per cent of the total public resources available for education in the country in the years 2005–2008 and more than 50 per cent during 2008–2010 (Ravishankar *et al.*, 2010). In effect, therefore, higher education expansion has

militated against Ethiopia's aspirations of meeting Education For All and Millennium Development Goals. This observation is palatable not only because it recognises that diverting resources away from primary education acts as an impediment for achieving universal primary education *per se* but also because it maintains that the achievement of other Education For All and Millennium Development Goals, such as reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, very much hinge upon the provision of a good quality primary education, which could only be possible when the primary sub-sector is adequately financed.

#### *Quality assurance in the higher education sector*

In Ethiopia, massive expansion of the higher education sector has caused much uproar amongst many observers due to its possible ramifications on quality (World Bank, 2004; Semela and Ayalew, 2008; Ashcroft, 2010; Reisberg and Rumbley, 2010; Semela, 2011; Ashcroft and Rayner, 2012; Akalu, 2013). A 2010 study on public education spending in Ethiopia in fact suggested a slowdown in the rate of expansion and increased attention to be invested in quality and value for money (Ravishankar *et al.*, 2010). Earlier than that, a World Bank (2004, p. 61) study on Ethiopian higher education, also warned: 'Expansion of the higher education system without maintaining and improving quality will be counterproductive and, in the long run, destabilizing'. Such growing frustrations are by no means unfounded in view of the multiple challenges with which the system is currently confronted: (1) the establishment of new public universities with dismal internal conditions and largely inexperienced staff (Ashcroft, 2010; Semela, 2011); (2) burgeoning private higher education institutions of dubious quality (Ministry of Education, 2010) and the potential to compromise standards even more as they compete for a growing number of students; (3) A growing influx of ill-prepared secondary education completers into the higher education system (Nega, 2009); (4) inadequate funding to address the immense needs of a nascent higher education system (Reisberg and Rumbley, 2010).

It should be noted that in 2003 the Ethiopian government created the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) as a reflection of its concern for quality. HERQA is mandated to 'evaluate' higher education institutions 'at least once every five years with a view to ensuring whether such institutions are up to standard and competent' and provide 'information to the public about the current situation and status of the institutions periodically' (FDRE, 2003, p. 2257). Among other things, HERQA is also mandated to ensure that education and

training offered by Ethiopian higher education institutions 'have quality' and are 'in line with economic, social and other appropriate policies of the country' (FDRE, 2003, p. 2257). Since its inception HERQA has arranged various awareness-raising workshops on quality and quality assurance, offered trainings on quality-related topics to academics and organised conferences that helped disseminate the latest research on the state of quality in Ethiopian higher education system. Most of all, however, HERQA has largely preoccupied itself with two major tasks: (1) providing institutional and programme accreditation to private higher education institutions; and (2) conducting institutional audits and producing reports in both public and private higher education institutions on the state of their internal quality enhancement activities. Thus, in just a period of two years (from 2006 to 2008), HERQA granted institutional accreditation to 64 private higher education institutions, while denying some 20 of the requests submitted to it. At the same time, it accredited 190 programmes and denied requests for another 64 programmes (Teshome and Kebede, 2009). Besides, HERQA carried out external institutional audits on nine public and five private colleges until 2009 (HERQA, 2009). Yet, several major criticisms are levelled at HERQA in connection with the conduct of its mandate. First, HERQA's institutional audit reports are made available only to the audited institutions but not to the public. Many consider this as a contradiction with its mandate to 'give information to the public about the current situation and status of the institutions periodically' (FDRE, 2003, p. 2257). What are at stake are therefore critical issues of transparency and accountability. Second, HERQA is charged with applying a double standard while monitoring the performance of public and private higher education institutions (Tamrat, 2011). In Ethiopia, public universities have a *de jure* accreditation status. In such a context, HERQA's quality assurance role is largely restricted to monitoring the quality of education and training offered by private institutions and often accompanied by punitive measures. A telling example is a recent decision by HERQA to close down some private higher institutions at the stroke of a pen. The reason: the quality of training offered by these institutions was judged to be of poor quality (Abiye, 2011). It could be argued that in the Ethiopian context, 'the establishment of a quality assurance agency [is] seen as a means of managing a rapidly expanding private higher education sector' (Ashcroft and Rayner, 2012, p. 20), rather than as an effort aimed at improving the quality of the student experience. Some commentators also contend that HERQA's existing capacity is such that it would not enable it to effectively monitor the

quality of a growing number of higher education institutions. Major problems in this regard are shortage of staff with requisite qualifications and experience, low resource base and limited international linkages (Semela, 2011; Tamrat, 2011; Ashcroft and Rayner, 2012; Kahsay, 2012).

Finally, while HERQA is established as an autonomous agency accountable to the Ministry of Education (FDRE, 2003) serious concerns are now articulated as to its real autonomous status, partly due to the appointment of its top management by the government and the composition of members in its management board. Thus, for example, despite an existing legislation provision, HERQA's management board is headed by the Minister of Education. Many of the 11 positions in the board are vacant and students and academics are not represented at all (Rayner and Ashcroft, 2011; Tamrat, 2011). In such a context, HERQA's capacity to make independent judgements is rather questionable. Research, for example, indicates that

'[o]ne of the major issues concerning the government quality assurance agencies is what degree of independence they should have both from ministers and from major ministries and departments ... the major arguments for a high degree of independence are that such independence will lead to greater trust and confidence, and enhance professional judgements' (Harman, 1998, p. 350).

HERQA's limited independence has, in fact, led some writers to use the term semi-autonomous when referring to HERQA (Tekle *et al.*, 2011). For still others, HERQA simply represents an extended arm of the state:

More recently, under instructions from the Government HERQA has visited all private higher education institutions and graded them on a four-point scale, with those at the bottom having their accreditation withdrawn. Surprisingly, the results of this exercise have not been published so that students can have more information as to which are the 'quality' institutions. (Ashcroft and Rayner, 2012, p. 28)

While existing governance arrangements, limited resources and most of all its limited capacity are currently constraining HERQA to be a viable agency to effectively monitor the quality of the sector, higher education institutions in Ethiopia have also largely failed to do their own part to curb a growing menace in quality within their premises. Some institutions have done no more than just setting up nominal quality-enhancement offices that received no credible support and attention from university leadership. Others have yet to establish quality control units and most do not have well-articulated procedures to monitor their own internal operations. Under current circumstances, the potential

contributions of existing internal quality enhancement structures is largely circumscribed within the context of less resource support, organisational micropolitics and, at times, blind resistance. A culture of quality has yet to be established. Generally, 'there is little evidence of self-initiated quality enhancement activities' (Semela, 2011, p. 420) in both public and private universities. 'As it appears, the lack of vision and enthusiasm to do the groundwork on the part of ... leadership seems to have thwarted efforts to put in place functional institutional quality assurance systems' (Semela, 2011, p. 421).

#### *Institutional autonomy in the current landscape*

It needs to be stated that since the start of higher education in Ethiopia, the Ministry of Education has largely assumed the responsibility to supervise all higher education institutions. Besides, as has elsewhere been the practice, conventional forms of internal quality monitoring processes have existed where universities have largely assumed the primary responsibility for the conduct of regular academic reviews as well as monitoring the quality of student learning through peer-based forms of assessment. To a limited degree, there have also been stakeholders' participation in quality control as is evident in student evaluations of the performance of their professors, the use of exit interviews with prospective university graduates and employers' participation in the design of curricula. The external examination system has been in place since the early days of the establishment of higher education. The oldest universities, for example, relied on the practice of inviting experienced professors from recognised Western universities for the purpose of quality assessment. These professors would normally serve as external examiners during student theses defense presentations, visit actual classrooms, held discussions with students and academic staff, examine curricula and course syllabi and ultimately hand in written reports.

Presently, universities in Ethiopia are, by law, granted institutional autonomy to develop and implement curricula, set up their own organisational structures, administer personnel, manage their funds and property, determine their own internal organisation and enact and implement their internal rules and procedures and, finally, employ academic and other staff (FDRE, 2009). Despite this legislation provision, however, Ethiopia's current massive expansion is pursued in a manner that infringes the autonomy of universities to exercise significant decision-making in crucial issues of student selection, curricula and even recruitment of academics. A very recent study in three public universities in Ethiopia (Addis Ababa, Mekele and Jimma

Universities), for example, found that these universities 'do not have the autonomy to decide on the size and quality of their incoming students' and concluded: 'Such contravention would obviously jeopardise the quality of education in the universities' (Kahsay, 2012, p. 247). In the current arrangement, for example, graduate assistantship positions in public universities are filled centrally by the Ministry of Education, even curricula began to be determined by the central Ministry of Education and its agencies in which the now defunct teacher education curricula in faculties of education have been notable examples of this trend (Shibeshi, 2008).

Another mechanism through which the institutional autonomy of public higher education institutions is currently being violated by the state is through postgraduate student admission decisions. As is currently the norm today, student admission decisions to many existing postgraduate programmes in Addis Ababa University (the country's largest and oldest university) are centrally determined by the Ministry of Education. It needs to be understood that prior to the start of the expansion effort, applicants to postgraduate programmes (at the master's level) were normally expected to possess relevant undergraduate degrees from a recognised institution of higher learning, a minimum cumulative grade-point average of 2.50, a set period of professional service, recommendation letters from their employers including their former professors in order to be considered for admission. This was followed by, in some cases, entrance examinations. Much to the dismay of many academics, no such tight requirements are duly considered when the Ministry of Education took over the place of public universities to decide who should be admitted to existing study programmes. As one veteran professor and dean of one of the largest colleges in the same university lamented, 'there is a ruling that we cannot prepare entrance examinations to screen students we receive from the Ministry of Education' (Akalu, 2013, p. 10). For still another professor, and a senior university official, his department's right can only go as far as deciding the number, rather than the eligibility, of candidates to his department's doctoral programmes (Akalu, 2013, p. 10). Many academics regard such a practice as a breach of institutional autonomy orchestrated in the presence of clearly laid out departmental admission criteria and duly approved by the appropriate organ of the university. While this represents, for some, a clear case of disenfranchising academics from major quality control decisions, and is perhaps reflective of the state's command and control approach in the management of quality assurance, some contextual background might help explain how such practices began.

Following the establishment of many new public universities in Ethiopia, an urgent need for teaching staff soon became apparent. In the process, the Ministry took the overall responsibility to recruit instructors centrally for the new public universities. At the same time, it has entrusted Addis Ababa University (AAU) to provide further training to these instructors at postgraduate and doctoral levels. When the new batch of postgraduate students began to arrive at the Addis Ababa University campus, however, a tug of war emerged between the Ministry and academic departments. The latter considered such an action as a violation of institutional autonomy and insisted on enforcing entry requirements (including entrance examinations) on these 'special group' of students (*qua* instructors from other universities, labelled sometimes as 'Ministry of Education students'). The Ministry, however, saw such a reaction as unreasonable, at least, and a targeted attempt to boycott government plans, at best. Although ultimately the Ministry's position won the day, what was particularly disturbing for some academics was that many private and self-sponsored applicants to the university's graduate programmes (for some, those with high calibre) are often denied access due to space limitations that is created in the process (Akalu, 2013).

Even a more insidious mechanism through which internal quality monitoring processes are said to be devalued by institutional managers is by downplaying a long-existing system of external examination. Asgedom (2008), for example, traces how external examination in Addis Ababa University has come to be continuously redefined from what it was originally understood to be 'external to Ethiopia' then progressively to 'external to the university', 'external to the faculty' and at last 'external to the department'. In fact, some departments in the university have entirely abandoned the practice as they continuously made allusions to a one-time university circular that had ruled out the use of external examiners from outside the university. Although it was couched as a cost reduction strategy, the ostensible reason for the circular was a perceived threat that shortage and therefore the difficulty of obtaining external examiners could be used as a reason for resisting the planned expansion at the postgraduate level. Yet, in actual practice, the use of external examination for postgraduate degrees varies from university to university and across departments within the same university, pointing again how such practices are negotiated, resisted and, at times, voluntarily accepted.

As indicated above, threats for institutional autonomy cannot always be perceived as coming from external agencies. There is reason to argue that institutional managers are also complicit in allowing practices that may be considered damaging for the autonomy of faculties and



departments and thereby affecting the quality of services rendered to students. For instance, in a rather scathing castigation of the previous leadership in Addis Ababa University, an anonymous group of whistle-blowers wrote:

The president is the university. He runs the university like his own private estate and family fief. People who assume positions in important offices of the University are not employed on the basis of merit. Nepotism, corruption and patronage are widespread. The abuse of meager university resources including housing, finance, vehicles and fuel is the hallmark of the present leadership. There is no accountability to public money. (Kahsay, 2012, p. 207).

Any understanding of institutional autonomy in Ethiopia cannot be complete without an examination of the structure of governance presently at work. The current governance arrangement of higher education came into effect when, in 2003, Ethiopia issued its Higher Education Proclamation No.351/2003, later replaced in 2009 by Higher Education Proclamation No.650/2009. Ethiopian public universities are under the jurisdiction of the federal government. As per the new proclamation, the board is the highest governing body of a public university and accountable to the Ministry of Education. Membership of the board comprises the board's chairperson who is appointed by the minister of education; the president of a university, who besides becoming a non-voting member, serves as a secretary of the board; three voting members selected and appointed by the Minister of Education; and another three voting members nominated by the university president in consultation with the university council and the senate and subject to approval by the Minister of Education (FDRE, 2009 Article 44). One of the key responsibilities of the board in the changing landscape of the higher education governance in Ethiopia is its power to 'rescind decisions made by the president or the senate when the decisions compromise institutional mission or contravene government policy ... or the Constitution' (FDRE, 2009, p. 5010).

In the specific context of Ethiopia's ambitious higher education expansion effort, this shift in governance arrangement from one in which higher education institutions previously enjoyed substantial autonomy to one characterised by the marginalisation of academics from key decision-making roles needs to be understood as suggesting two trends: (1) a reduced lack of trust on higher education institutions to serve wider public and government interests when left to their own devices (Maton, 2005) and, more particularly, (2) a response to a perceived resistance from academics to boycott higher education reform and expansion

plans. In fact, there is evidence that a growing discontent is mounting from academics over an influx of largely ill-prepared candidates to universities' programmes. As one associate professor in Addis Ababa University commented on a growing laxity in postgraduate students' efforts in their studies, he had this to say: 'When you start granting admission to a student in a form of charity, why would he/she study in the first place?' (Akalu, 2013, p. 16). Another professor similarly bemoaned:

I have doctoral students who still want me to provide them handouts ... It is unfortunate that we are *teachers* at this level. We should not be teachers at master's and PhD levels. Our role must be one of guidance, one of pointing direction. The students should engage in their own readings based on the guidance and direction they receive. (Akalu, 2013, p. 16)

Yet, despite obvious signs of growing deterioration of quality, a spectre of haste now reigns throughout the system as rapid expansion of higher education is discursively linked to Ethiopian commitment to poverty reduction and economic growth. In fact, politically, rapid economic growth has been construed as *the* guarantee to the very survival of the Ethiopian nation (EPRDF, 2000). In such a context, the frequent discursive linkages often drawn between higher education and economic growth further bolstered efforts at expansion and at the same time heightened concerns over accountability and excessive regulation of internal processes in universities.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that an ideologically driven and massive expansion of higher education in Ethiopia has placed undue pressures on the state of quality enhancement and autonomy of universities. Research has thus far documented the magnitude of problems expansion has caused in Ethiopian universities including work intensification for academics, deterioration of quality, lack of experienced academics especially in the new public universities and decreased per student budgetary allocations (Saint, 2004; Semela and Ayalew, 2008; Tessema, 2009; Ashcroft, 2010; Reisberg and Rumbley, 2010; Semela, 2011). This article has also shown that both external and internal quality assurance systems in Ethiopian higher education still leave much to be desired. On the one hand, HERQA has yet to build its capacity to become a robust external quality agency in order to be able to oversee the operation of all existing higher education institutions. On the other hand, higher education institutions themselves struggle from a lack of visionary leadership that is largely ambivalent to

take initiatives toward quality enhancement and the creation of a quality culture within their premises. Further, frequent interferences in the affairs of universities by the state in the name of accountability suggest that the role of universities in Ethiopia has been reduced to *only* one of implementing government policies. In the process, the critical roles that universities could play in the Ethiopian society and in the nascent higher education system have been largely undermined. The production of critical discourse by universities is highly desirable at the moment when Ethiopia is attempting to align its higher education system to the imperatives of the knowledge society. However, increasing marginalisation of academics in governance structures suggest that they are progressively reduced from their professional status to that of employees (Amaral and Rosa, 2011).

Government accountability should not be used as an excuse for eroding institutional autonomy. Therefore, there needs to be more scope to provide academics with desirable levels of autonomy to exercise meaningful decisions while at the same time holding them accountable for results. Institutional managers have a significant role to play in this process. They should enhance academics' participation in decisions that affect them. A desirable goal is to make a sustained effort to establish an effective quality culture within the higher education institutions that 'involves the articulation of shared ... perspectives, values, procedures and approaches to practice' (Gordon, 2002, p. 104). 'In the final analysis, the successful transformation of public universities will hinge on finding an appropriate balance between credible accountability practices and effective autonomy conditions' (Salmi, 2007, p. 20).

That said, it is important to realise that higher education expansion in Ethiopia has been set as an agenda through a political process that has largely marginalised the academy. It has ideological rationalities and lines of argument that often find expression in economic growth and poverty reduction. It remains that expansion is an important goal for Ethiopia not only from the point of view of redressing previous inequities in the system but also in view of meeting intended national development strategies. Yet, the ideological aspects of the expansion effort have to strike reasonable balance with the practical realities of limited resources, concerns about the quality of student learning and the autonomy of universities.

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