

# Quality Assurance Reforms in Ethiopian Higher Education: An Examination of Past Limitations and the New Accountability-Oriented Audit System

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## Systematic Review

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# Abstract

This article analyzes the transformation of quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education, transitioning from the previous Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) to the Education and Training Authority's (ETA) new accountability-oriented audit system. HERQA's efficacy was compromised by inadequate accountability, a restricted "fitness for purpose" quality paradigm, fragmented oversight, input-centric evaluations, limited program reach, and institutional malpractices. Employing a document review, this study synthesizes primary policy instruments from the Federal Ministry of Education and ETA with important secondary sources on Ethiopian quality assurance. A thematic analysis elucidates the systemic challenges and the theoretical underpinnings of the reform procedure. In response, the ETA has instituted foundational reforms: a fortified legal framework mandating institutional accountability, an expanded quality conceptualization integrating both "fitness for purpose" and "fitness of purpose," and the strategic adoption of the internationally recognized ADRI (Approach, Deployment, Results, and Improvements) model. This paradigm shift heralds a more comprehensive, evidence-driven, and continuously adaptive quality assurance environment. The article explores the anticipated implications of these reforms for compliance, governance, and national development alignment, while concurrently acknowledging inherent challenges in balancing accountability with institutional autonomy.

## 1. Introduction

In the 21st century, higher education globally has undergone thoughtful transformations driven by forces such as massification, globalization, technological advancements, and increasing societal demands for skilled graduates and impactful research. This evolving landscape has altered the relationship between higher education institutions (HEIs), governments, and the public, leading to an intensified focus on accountability and quality (Banta, 2005; Gallagher, 2010; Shupe, 1999; Stensaker & Harvey, 2010).

Traditionally, quality in higher education was often an implicit concept, largely self-regulated by academic communities. However, as higher education systems expanded and diversified, concerns about public investment, employability of graduates, and international competitiveness encouraged the development of explicit and systematic quality assurance mechanisms (Martin, 2018; Probert, 2015).

Theories of quality assurance in higher education have evolved from internal "fitness for purpose" models, emphasizing institutional self-improvement, to external "fitness of purpose" frameworks, which prioritize public accountability and adherence to defined standards (Melton, 2019; Neema-Abooki, 2022). The rise of the "auditing society" (Shore, 2008) has seen a shift towards more external, performance-based, and accountability-oriented quality assurance systems, often involving regular audits, accreditation processes, and performance indicators to ensure standards are met and public trust is maintained (Harvey & Green, 1993; Kooli et al., 2019; Power, 2000; Sallis, 2002). This global trend reflects a widespread recognition that effective quality assurance and audit are essential not only for maintaining academic standards but also for safeguarding institutional credibility, fostering public confidence, and facilitating the international recognition of qualifications (Jafarov, 2024; Martin, 2018).

Within the African continent, the imperative for quality assurance and audit is also acute. Many African nations have witnessed expansion of their higher education sectors in recent decades, driven by a growing youth population, increasing demand for skilled labor, and the recognition of education as a key driver of economic development and social progress (Mlambo et al, 2021; Molla et al., 2018; Teferra & Knight, 2009; UNESCO, 2024). However, this rapid growth has often outpaced the development of adequate regulatory and oversight mechanisms, leading to concerns about declining quality, inconsistent standards, and the proliferation of unaccredited or substandard institutions and programs (Afolabi & Idowu, 2019; Drape et al., 2016). Consequently, quality assurance reforms in African higher education are increasingly vital for ensuring that educational provisions are relevant to national development needs, competitive on a global scale, and provide genuine value to students and society. Efforts in many African countries, often supported by regional initiatives like the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) in higher education, aim to strengthen internal quality management systems within HEIs and enhance the capacity of national quality assurance agencies (HAQAA Initiatives, 2017; Nabaho et al., 2020). A key challenge remains the balance between promoting institutional autonomy and ensuring external accountability, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Kallo, 2021; Yeboah & Boasiako, 2024).

Ethiopia's higher education system has experienced significant growth and reform over the past quarter of a century, mirroring global and African trends. Recognizing higher education's crucial role in national development, the government launched a rapid expansion program, increasing public and private universities from two in the early 1990s to over fifty. However, this growth often prioritized massification over quality, leading to considerable challenges in maintaining academic standards (Areaya, 2010; Ashcraft, 2004; Saint, 2004; Woldegiyorgis, 2013).

To address these quality concerns, the Government of Ethiopia established the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) in 2003 through Proclamation No. 351/2003 (FDRE, 2003). As an autonomous legal body accountable to the Ministry of Education, HERQA was tasked with supervising the relevance and quality of HEIs. For two decades, HERQA spearheaded national efforts to safeguard educational standards, employing various mechanisms, including institutional quality assurance and audit.

Proclamation 650/2009, granting it the authority to control, guide, and monitor the relevance and quality of higher education nationwide, later refined HERQA's mandate. It played a crucial role in developing accreditation and quality auditing systems tailored to the Ethiopian context, including redesigning subjective accreditation guidelines to be measurable and objective. Its activities included accrediting and re-accrediting

significant number of programs in HEIs, auditing over hundred private institutions, and conducting training workshops. HERQA also offered direct support through follow-up visits for the implementation of quality audit reports and provided training for selected academic staff and quality assurance officers (Teshome, 2017).

The shift from HERQA to ETA signifies a profound change beyond a mere change in nomenclature; it reflects a fundamental re-evaluation of how quality assurance in education are conceptualized and implemented. Driven by a critical examination of HERQA's systemic failures, this move signals a conscious journey towards a more comprehensive, enforceable, and stakeholder-centric model. Insights from scholars such as Tamrat (2020), who highlighted the implementation lag and poor coordination of quality assurance mechanisms, and Abebe (2015), who examined the challenges of institutionalizing internal quality enhancement, provide a critical lens through which to analyze the reforms undertaken by the ETA. This article, therefore, critically examines these past limitations and analyzes the new accountability-oriented audit system introduced by the ETA. It analyzes its theoretical foundations, practical implications, and potential impact on fostering a more reflective and responsive quality assurance landscape in Ethiopian higher education.

## 2. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following fundamental questions, providing a framework for analyzing the reform process:

- i. What were the limitations of the former HERQA's quality assurance frameworks in Ethiopian higher education, and how has the Education and Training Authority (ETA) revised its quality audit frameworks to address these limitations?
- ii. What are the key characteristics of the ETA's new quality assurance and audit processes, particularly concerning accountability, the definition of quality, and the assessment model,?
- iii. How will these reforms influence the long-term sustainability of quality and relevance in Ethiopian higher education and TVET institutions?

## 3. Methodology

This review, titled "Quality Assurance Reforms in Ethiopian Higher Education: An Examination of Past Limitations and the New Accountability-Oriented Audit System," utilized a systematic literature review and document analysis approach. This allowed for a rigorous examination of existing scholarly works and official pronouncements on Ethiopian higher education quality assurance. The process involved systematic identification, selection, and qualitative content analysis of relevant articles, books and chapters, PhD dissertations, and official reports.

### Identification of Documents

A multi-pronged search strategy across academic databases, institutional repositories, and official government and international organization websites was employed to identify documents specific to Ethiopia's higher education quality assurance.

**Academic Databases and Websites:** Key resources included Scopus and Web of Science for peer-reviewed journal articles and Google Scholar for broader coverage, including older literature (e.g., Fink, 2019, highlights the utility of comprehensive database searching in systematic reviews). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global and the Addis Ababa University Institutional Repository (AAU-ETD) were primary sources for PhD dissertations. Professional networking sites like ResearchGate and Academia.edu were also consulted.

**Official Reports:** Official government websites, including the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE), and particularly the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) (now succeeded by the Education and Training Authority (ETA)), provided official quality audit reports, accreditation guidelines, and strategic documents. Websites of international organizations like the World Bank, UNESCO, and the African Union were also scoured.

**Search Strategy:** A combination of keywords and Boolean operators ensured comprehensive coverage. Common search terms included: ("higher education" OR "tertiary education") AND ("quality assurance" OR "quality audit" OR "accreditation" OR "quality enhancement") AND ("Ethiopia" OR "Ethiopian"). Specific terms like "HERQA," "ETA," "Ethiopian Ministry of Education," and "PhD dissertation" combined with "higher education quality" were also utilized. This iterative search process involved refining keywords and employing citation chaining (snowballing), both backward and forward, to ensure no critical sources were missed (e.g., Webster & Watson, 2002, emphasize the importance of systematic search strategies including snowballing in comprehensive literature reviews).

### Sampling

The population for this review comprised all accessible scholarly and official documents directly related to higher education quality assurance and audit in Ethiopia. A purposive sampling strategy was applied, aiming for saturation of information (e.g., Patton, 2015, elaborates on purposive sampling for in-depth understanding in qualitative research) rather than statistical representativeness.

An initial broad search yielded 603 journal articles, 17 PhD dissertations, and 86 official reports. These were systematically reduced to the final sample through a multi-stage screening process: (a) Duplicate removal (using reference management software), (b) title and abstract screening

(for initial relevance, and (c) full-text review (against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria).

This process typically resulted in a final sample of around 71 highly relevant journal articles, 7 PhD dissertations, and 27 key official reports.

#### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The study included documents that explicitly addressed one or more of the following themes within the Ethiopian higher education system: "higher education quality assurance," "quality audit," "accreditation," "quality enhancement," or "relevance." Eligible sources were limited to a select set of scholarly and official publications, specifically: peer-reviewed journal articles, published PhD dissertations, and official reports from recognized governmental bodies like the Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MoSHE), the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), and the Education and Training Authority (ETA). Reports from reputable international organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO were also included if they were directly relevant to the Ethiopian context. All included documents were required to be in English, with a publication date of 2003 or later, as this year marked a significant point in Ethiopia's quality assurance efforts with the establishment of HERQA. Older sources were only considered if they provided essential historical context.

To maintain the integrity and focus of the research, several types of documents were excluded from the analysis. These included sources that lacked a specific focus on quality assurance, such as those that dealt only with curriculum design or general educational issues. Additionally, non-scholarly and unverified sources were systematically excluded. This category comprised undergraduate or Master's theses (unless their impact was exceptionally significant), conference abstracts, opinion pieces, news articles, commercial reports, and unverified online blog posts. The study also excluded all duplicate publications and any sources from unknown or unreliable authors or organizations.

#### Data Analysis

The selected documents were subjected to qualitative content analysis, integrating elements of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical process unfolded through six iterative steps: initially involving thorough, repeated readings of documents to foster deep understanding and generate preliminary notes. Following this, a systematic coding process was implemented, employing both deductive codes derived from predefined research questions (such as "policy frameworks," "HERQA's/ETA's role," "outcomes," "challenges," "quality assurance models," and "audit systems") and inductive codes that allowed for the emergence of new themes directly from the text (e.g., "lack of accountability," "capacity limitation," and "focus on inputs vs. outcomes"). Subsequently, related codes were grouped into broader categories and overarching themes, exemplified by the synthesis of "funding shortages," "lack of trained staff," and "double standard" "unethical behaviour" theme. The findings from these themes were then synthesized, identifying patterns, consistencies, contradictions, and gaps through comparing perspectives, tracing policy evolution, and mapping interrelationships. A critical analysis followed, where arguments, evidence, and conclusions were evaluated for their strengths, limitations, credibility, and policy implications. Finally, these synthesized themes and critical insights merged to form the logical structure of the review, culminating in evidence-based conclusions and recommendations.

This methodology, therefore, involved a thematic analysis of diverse documents to identify recurring challenges, policy shifts, theoretical foundations, and the empirical rationale driving the recent quality assurance and audit reforms.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Outcomes and Challenges of the Former Quality Audit Process (HERQA)

HERQA's two-decade operation, despite its limitations, laid essential groundwork for quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education.

#### *Enhanced awareness and capacity building*

HERQA fundamentally shifted the sector by compelling institutions to engage with systematic quality processes, raising awareness of quality as an explicit, continuous responsibility. This was operationalized through extensive capacity-building initiatives, including workshops and training for university leadership, academic staff, and quality assurance officers (Teshome, 2017; Teshome & Kebede, 2009). These programs equipped personnel with practical skills for self-assessment and report writing, necessitating institutions to develop rigorous Self-Evaluation Documents (SEDs). The periodic institutional audits and the training of internal quality assurance units, despite facing challenges like staff turnover (Dawud, 2023), demonstrably fostered a greater understanding of quality assurance frameworks, laying crucial groundwork for subsequent reforms (ETA, 2025).

#### *Foundation for self-assessment*

HERQA's mandate for institutions to conduct self-assessments served as the foundational internal quality assurance mechanism. This process required each HEI to undertake an evidence-based introspection into its operational effectiveness across key domains, such as governance, curriculum, and research. The output, the SED, was a critical analytical report detailing strengths and proposing remedial actions, which then informed HERQA's external audit process. The core objective was to promote an intrinsic culture of quality enhancement. However,

implementation was often hampered by an emerging quality assurance culture and the perception that self-assessment was merely a bureaucratic hurdle, sometimes resulting in SEDs that lacked deep, critical engagement. The transition to the ETA reflects an evolution aimed at refining these mechanisms for a more impactful, accountability-oriented system (ETA, 2025).

Nevertheless, despite these two positive developments that HERQA attempted to attain, it confronted substantial and ultimately systemic challenges that severely undermined its effectiveness as inherent challenges of the quality audit framework. The challenges are described in a few subsequent pages.

### **Absence of an effective accountability mechanism**

A critical flaw was the profound lack of robust enforcement guidelines. Public HEIs often failed to implement audit recommendations without consequence, coupled with an absence of follow-up from the national agency (Adamu & Addamu, 2012). This compromised the integrity of the quality assurance process and echoed broader issues of governance (ETA, 2025; Saketa, 2014).

### **Limited quality concept ("fitness for purpose" only)**

HERQA's definition was predominantly restricted to "fitness for purpose," evaluating institutions solely on their internal objectives. This meaning of quality is wide spread among the graduates of many universities in Ethiopia including Addis Ababa University (Ademe, 2024). This narrow scope neglected "*fitness of purpose*"—the crucial alignment of institutional goals with broader societal needs, national development priorities, and critical stakeholder demands (ETA, 2025; Tadesse, 2014; Tsegaye, 2020).

### **Lack of a system-oriented and fragmented framework**

Audit criteria inadequately assessed the intricate interconnectedness between strategic goals, implementation, outcomes, and continuous improvement. This reflected a fragmented approach to quality management (ETA, 2025; Tamrat, 2020). Abebe (2015) and Tsegaye (2020) further noted that limitations in leadership, resources, outputs and a strong quality culture hindered effective institutionalization of internal quality enhancement.

### **Sole focus on input-process-output (IPO) without key indicators**

While foundational, the IPO model lacked specific quality indicators to effectively measure outcomes against objectives. It failed to adequately assess evidence-based improvements or the dynamic coordination between planning, strategy, and results (ETA, 2025).

### **Limited program scope**

HERQA's audits primarily targeted regular higher education programs, clearly overlooking critical and expanding areas such as postgraduate, distance, online, and summer programs (ETA, 2025).

### **Capacity limitations within the authority**

HERQA has struggled with a predominantly young and less experienced staff, limited training opportunities, low salaries leading to high turnover, and inadequate infrastructure. Its expanded mandate to cover general education further stretches these already strained capacities (Tamrat, 2023).

### **Ineffective assessment schemes (input orientation)**

The quality assurance schemes remained largely "input-oriented," with a "ticking boxes" approach that stifled innovation and forced compliance with rigid, often irrelevant, rules (Tamrat, 2023).

### **Service standards and accountability deficits (inconsistencies and tardiness)**

Institutions frequently faced "unrealistic standards" and inconsistencies influenced by individual reviewer "whims and feelings." A lack of formal operational moderation led to variations, and tardiness in critical services like accreditation renewal was common due to an absence of time-bound standards and accountability (Tamrat, 2023).

### **Double standards (public vs. private institutions)**

A critical credibility issue remains the historical failure to rigorously inspect public universities, which cater to over 85% of enrollment. This dichotomy hinders overall quality improvement efforts. The implementation of regulations are biased to the public (Tamrat, 2023; Yirdaw, 2016) and inconsistent treatment of governmental and non-governmental HEIs (Ayano, 2020).

### **Institutional malpractice and unethical behaviour**

Institutional malpractice, particularly within the private higher education sector, acted as a significant impediment to genuine quality assurance. Tamrat (2023) critically termed this a "*flagrant violation of the law*," where profit motives drove providers to employ sophisticated methods to "*elude government inspection*." This sabotage of standards was exacerbated by collusion among institutional staff, parents, and students seeking illegal credentials. Practices included dishonest assessment, relaxed admission, and the sale of academic credentials, severely undermining the integrity and credibility of qualifications and challenging agencies like HERQA.

Further analysis of the review indicated several limitations in the effectiveness of HERQA. Tamrat (2020), Tsegaye (2020), and the FDRE (2022) noted a hindrance from an *emerging quality assurance culture*, *insufficient institutional capacity*, and the perception that quality assurance was merely a *compliance exercise* rather than a tool for continuous improvement, leading to widespread criticism. Specific critiques included Geda (2014)'s finding on the *lack of adequate structure and system* in institutions, and the use of *insufficiently strict accreditation standards* that allowed *substandard education programs* to persist. Tadesse (2014) questioned whether quality assurance was a genuine "*boon or merely a bandwagon*," highlighting *methodological flaws and misalignments* that, along with the observations of Adamu and Addamu (2012), and Tamrat (2012), failed to translate audit findings into tangible improvements. Kahsay (2012) contended that the primary challenge lay with the "*human element*" and unmet enabling conditions, making quality assurance efforts little more than a "*slogan*," while Tsegaye (2020) concluded that the system remained in its "*infancy stage*," neglecting crucial outputs. These persistent issues ultimately led to HERQA's re-establishment as the ETA in 2022 (FDRE, 2023; Tamrat, 2023).

## 4.2. The New Quality Audit Process (ETA)

In direct response to the systemic issues embedded within the previous framework, ETA has initiated fundamental reforms. The new quality audit process, guided by the FDRE (2023, 2023a) ETA (2025) and MoE (2024) "Higher Education Institutional Accreditation Standard Handbook and Standards for Generic Program Accreditation," and Directive for Higher Education institutions Institutional and Program Accreditation mark a deliberate and strategic shift towards an effective, accountable, and continuously improving internal quality assurance system:

### Strengthened legal framework for institutional accountability

The ETA has developed comprehensive guidelines and standards for both higher education and TVET, building upon and enforcing previously unenforced legal provisions within Proclamation No. 1152/2011 (FDRE ETA, 2023b). This new framework explicitly stipulates that failure to implement quality audit recommendations will result in demonstrable institutional accountability, directly addressing the primary weakness of the HERQA (ETA, 2025). This aligns with consistent calls for greater accountability from scholars like Tamrat (2012, 2020) and reflects observations regarding the more developed quality culture in private HEIs (Saketa, 2014).

### Revised and expanded quality concept definition

The ETA's framework now critically incorporates both "fitness for purpose" and "fitness of purpose" (FDRE, 2023). This crucial dual definition ensures institutions are evaluated not only on their internal mission but also, more importantly, on the appropriateness and relevance of these objectives to national priorities and stakeholder needs. This shift moves the audit focus from mere input assessment to a comprehensive evaluation of institutional mission performance and operational systems (ETA, 2025). This broadened perspective directly addresses the critical gap identified by scholars advocating for more relevant and impactful education in Ethiopia (Woldegiyorgis, 2017).

*Adoption of the ADRI Model:* Replacing the less effective and fragmented IPO model, the ETA has strategically adopted the internationally recognized ADRI model (FDRE, 2023, ETA, 2025). This cyclical quality assurance model facilitates comprehensive evaluation by intricately linking institutional goals with their implementation, achieved results, and a mandatory commitment to continuous improvement. The ADRI model allows for effective performance assessment across four interconnected facets: Approach (strategic planning and methodology), Deployment (effective implementation), Results (measured outcomes), and Improvements (ongoing enhancement cycles). This integrated, evidence-based approach profoundly emphasizes continuous improvement and full integration of quality assurance with strategic goals and operational plans, addressing the "human element" and systemic flaws identified by Kahsay (2012), Abebe (2015) and ETA (2025).

## 4.3. Potential impacts of quality assurance developments in Ethiopian higher education

### Impacts of strengthening the legal framework for accountability

The strengthening of this legal framework is expected to yield several positive impacts. It will enhance compliance and enforcement by providing clear rules, principles, and standards for institutional behavior and decision-making. This structured approach can significantly improve governance and transparency within HEIs, as the framework sets benchmarks for acceptable practices and establishes mechanisms for holding parties accountable (Yirdaw, 2016). Furthermore, a strong legal framework can lead to better resource utilization by influencing how resources are allocated and encouraging efficiency across institutions. Ultimately, clear legal accountability can foster risk mitigation and increased stakeholder trust in government institutions and the overall education system (Leveille, 2006; Shewbridge et al., 2019). This represents a crucial shift from a period of "benign neglect" regarding accountability, compelling institutions to become more answerable for their outcomes.

However, this development is not without its challenges. There is a risk of increased bureaucracy and workload, as internal quality assurance (IQA) procedures can lead to extensive documentation and formalization, potentially overemphasizing compliance at the expense of genuine quality improvement (Teshome & Kebede, 2006). The growth of non-academic middle management, as observed elsewhere, can also hinder efficiency. Faculty resistance to new IQA processes is a commonly reported challenge that Ethiopia may face. Moreover, simply enacting new laws or establishing regulatory bodies may have impact if the underlying "human element" is not adequately addressed (Kong et al., 2022). Poor legal frameworks, if not effectively implemented, can contribute to low academic performance (Msunga, 2024). A delicate balance must also be kept between increasing accountability and preserving institutional autonomy, as excessive regulation could inadvertently stifle innovation and academic freedom (Findlow, 2008). Finally, effective enforcement of the strengthened legal framework will require substantial resources for monitoring and supervision, which can be a constraint in developing countries (Sundaram, 2024).

A critical tension exists between the ETA's move towards a standardized quality audit system and the need for institutional autonomy. While standardization aims for consistency, overly rigid centralized control could lead to superficial compliance rather than authentic quality enhancement. The experience of countries like Vietnam, where increased autonomy was linked to quality improvements, suggests that Ethiopia must carefully balance these forces, empowering institutions while ensuring strong oversight (Ali Mohammed, 2024).

#### Impacts of ensuring fitness of purpose in quality assurance

A strong focus on fitness of purpose promises several transformative impacts. It directly addresses the long-standing issue of curriculum misalignment with industry standards and job market needs in Ethiopia (Addis Fortune, 2025). By emphasizing that curricula must prepare graduates with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the world of work and income-generating activities, the reform aims to bridge the current skills gap. This approach will also foster a stronger alignment with national development goals, recognizing higher education as a vital "engine for national development". Institutions will be assessed on their contributions to societal problems, economic growth, and poverty reduction, ensuring their activities are strategically aligned with national priorities. Furthermore, this perspective allows for institutional distinctiveness and specialization, encouraging institutions to "evolve, specialize, and expand" based on their unique contributions rather than conforming to a uniform mold. Ultimately, by focusing on the needs of the "customer"—industry and society—quality assurance shifts towards producing competent, adaptable workers whose skills are directly relevant to market demands, thereby enhancing graduate employability (Harvery, 2025).

Despite its potential, implementing fitness of purpose faces challenges. Clearly, defining and adapting institutional missions is paramount, yet many Ethiopian institutions lack an effective research strategy or comprehensive databases to inform these definitions (Addis Fortune, 2025). A key question arises: "Whose purpose and how is fitness assessed?". Effective implementation necessitates active engagement and consensus among diverse stakeholders, including industry, students, faculty, and government, to define and validate purposes. This can be complex due to competing interests (Berger, 2005). Addressing significant resource disparities among institutions is also critical, as achieving fitness of purpose requires adequate resources, including qualified staff, facilities, and materials (ETA, 2025). There is also a cautionary aspect: a focus on process perfection without ensuring the relevance of the output can lead to "perfectly useless" outcomes. Finally, resistance to curriculum change from instructors, a known obstacle, must be effectively managed (Akalu, 2014).

The emphasis on "fitness of purpose" represents a fundamental shift from mere compliance to strategic relevance in quality assurance. It moves beyond simply ensuring that institutions meet external standards (ETA, 2023) to a deeper evaluation of whether their stated goals and outcomes are truly appropriate and impactful for Ethiopia's developmental needs and labor market (Akalu, 2014). This implies a proactive, strategic alignment where institutions are not just conforming but actively contributing to national priorities. This transition will necessitate a more dynamic and responsive curriculum development process, continually informed by needs assessments and industry feedback (FDRE, 2019).

The challenge of continuously defining, assessing, and adapting this "purpose" in a dynamic environment like Ethiopia's, characterized by rapid changes and persistent graduate unemployment and skill mismatches, is considerable (Akalu, 2014). This requires better data collection on graduate outcomes, labor market needs, and societal impact. Furthermore, it demands strong stakeholder engagement to ensure that the defined purposes genuinely reflect the changing needs of the country, preventing static or internally driven objectives that could lead to the production of "perfectly useless" graduates (Beerkens & Udam, 2017).

#### Adoption of the ADRI Model

The adoption of ADRI is anticipated to promote systematic quality enhancement by encouraging a culture of self-reflection and peer review within institutions. It provides a structured framework for continuous improvement, moving beyond isolated assessments. A significant impact will be the fostering of data-driven decision-making, as the "Results" phase explicitly mandates the use of KPIs (key performance indicators) and data trends for evidence-based evaluation, supporting academic performance and sustainable development. This model also enhances accountability and transparency by requiring clear articulation of plans and measurable outcomes, with self-evaluation reports forming the basis for external audits (ETA, 2025). Furthermore, ADRI is expected to improve program development and delivery by analyzing curriculum design and teaching quality, potentially leading to better student learning outcomes and reduced attrition rates. The model's indicators are designed to align institutional missions with overarching national quality assurance goals (ETA, d.n.a).

However, the successful implementation of ADRI may face several challenges. It demands a strong data infrastructure for effective data collection, collation, and reporting. Ethiopia currently faces significant barriers to data-driven decision-making, including implementation of data-driven policy, organizational culture issues, and inadequate data management policies (Adamu, 2024). Poor internet connectivity and insufficient ICT infrastructure are also major impediments to digitalization, which is crucial for modern QA processes (Oliso, 2023). Furthermore, substantial staff training and capacity building are required for personnel to understand and effectively apply ADRI principles and other quality assurance frameworks (Lim, 1999; Mehari et al., 2024; Oliso, 2023; Teshome & Kebede, 2009). Ethiopia's existing shortage of expertise and leadership in quality-related processes underscores this need. Cultivating a culture of self-reflection and improvement, rather than mere compliance, is essential, but existing faculty resistance to IQA processes and a focus on procedurals could hinder genuine enhancement. There is a risk that ADRI processes could become "cumbersome" and lead to "additional workload" without directly improving quality if not managed effectively. Finally, while ADRI is an international model, its successful application in Ethiopia will necessitate careful adaptation to local conditions, resource constraints, and cultural contexts, as developing countries often face unique challenges like inadequate funding and lack of qualified faculty

Therefore, the successful functioning of ADRI is critically dependent on better data infrastructure and a supportive data culture. The "Results" and "Improvement" phases of ADRI are inherently data-driven, requiring reliable KPIs and evidence-based evaluation (Yeboah & Boasiako, 2024). However, Ethiopia's existing barriers to data-driven decision-making, including policy gaps, organizational culture issues, and inadequate ICT infrastructure, pose significant limitations (Adamu, 2024; Oliso, 2023). Without substantial parallel investments in data collection systems, digital infrastructure, and a cultural shift towards valuing and utilizing data for decision-making, the "Results" phase could become speculative, and the "Improvement" cycle might not be genuinely evidence-based. This would risk ADRI becoming a bureaucratic exercise rather than a tool for meaningful enhancement.

## 5. Discussion

The reforms undertaken by the ETA represent a critical juncture in Ethiopia's commitment to enhance quality and relevance of education. The strategic shift from HERQA's limited model to the ETA's new framework reflects a clear learning curve, addressing long-standing criticisms and aligning with contemporary international best practices. This move is a direct response to the "hidden lacunae" and the "infancy stage" of quality assurance identified by scholars like Tadesse (2014) and Tsegaye (2020), respectively.

The most significant and transformative change lies in the strengthened legal framework for accountability. The consistent failure of institutions to implement HERQA's recommendations, evidenced by recurring deficiencies across audit cycles, was a major systemic impediment (ETA, 2025). This aligns with Tamrat's (2012, 2020) observations on the challenging evolution of quality assurance in Ethiopia, where implementation lagged behind policy. By explicitly mandating consequences for non-compliance, the ETA effectively transforms quality audits from mere advisory exercises into enforceable mechanisms, by fostering genuine institutional responsibility. This also resonates with Weldearegay's (2020) findings that a stronger emphasis on quality control and accountability is more pronounced in private institutions, and addresses Kahsay's (2012) concern that quality assurance was merely a slogan due to unmet enabling conditions and lack of commitment to implementation. The FDRE (2023) standards aim to enforce this accountability by demanding "critically reflective, clear, detailed evidence" and fostering continuous quality improvement.

Moreover, the expanded definition of quality to include "fitness of purpose" represents a profound conceptual leap. Ethiopian higher education has frequently faced criticism for a tangible disconnect between its output and the crucial needs of the labor market and national development priorities. Tadesse (2014), among others, has consistently advocated for higher education that is more responsive and relevant. By requiring institutions to align their goals with stakeholder needs, the ETA's framework aims to cultivate institutions that are not merely internally efficient but also externally impactful (FDRE, 2023). This strategy is indispensable for ensuring graduates possess the competencies required by the economy and that research contributes to national issues, thereby correcting the historical imbalance of massification over quality (Woldegiyorgis, 2013, 2012).

The adoption of the ADRI model constitutes another progressive and crucial step. The limitations of the IPO (input-process-output) model, particularly its inadequacy in comprehensively assessing the complex relationships between planning, execution, outcomes, and continuous improvement, were unambiguously apparent (ETA, 2025). The ADRI model, conversely, provides a more strong and holistic framework for evaluating performance (FDRE, 2023). Its inherent cyclical nature fundamentally promotes continuous improvement, moving beyond a static snapshot assessment to a dynamic process of reflection and enhancement. This deliberate emphasis on "improvements" within the ADRI framework underscores the ETA's commitment to cultivating a culture of ongoing self-correction and development within institutions, rather than merely identifying deficiencies. This directly counteracts the "methodological flaws" noted by Tadesse (2014) and the "fragmented approach" described by Tamrat (2020).

While these comprehensive reforms hold immense promise, their successful and sustainable implementation will critically depend on several factors, many of which addressed by Tamrat (2023). These include substantial resource allocation, effective capacity building for both auditors and institutional staff, and unwavering political will. The pervasive challenges from the HERQA era, such as the shortage of human capacity in quality-related processes and the difficulty in recruiting experienced auditors (Teshome & Kebede, 2009), must be proactively and

comprehensively addressed by the ETA. This includes overcoming staff competency issues, high turnover due to meagre salaries, inadequate infrastructure, and the strain of an expanded mandate (Tamrat, 2023). Abebe's (2014) findings of internal quality enhancement, highlighting limitations in leadership, resources, communication, and a strong quality culture, underscore the deep-rooted institutional changes required. The shift towards accountability-oriented system may also face resistance (particularly from the private sector) if not accurately managed with clear communication, transparent processes, and supportive mechanisms, ensuring it doesn't become another "bandwagon" without real impact (Tadesse, 2014).

Furthermore, the issue of double standards, where public universities have largely escaped rigorous inspection compared to private providers, remains a critical challenge the ETA must address for its credibility and for meaningful overall quality improvement (Tamrat, 2023; Yirdaw, 2016). The inclusion of all higher education programs—encompassing postgraduate, distance, online, and summer modalities—within the new audit scope (FDRE, 2023) is a pivotal improvement to ensure consistent standards across all forms of learning.

Finally, to truly reform, the ETA needs a comprehensive national reform blueprint that goes beyond mere revised guidelines. This blueprint must understand and tackle the behavior of dishonest providers, address internal capacity limitations, and involve wider consultation with all stakeholders, including employers and professional associations (Tamrat, 2023). Strengthening measures like hotlines for whistle blowing, short-trainings and online accreditation systems are also vital to combat malpractices.

## 6. Conclusion

Ethiopia's developments in higher education quality assurance, including a strengthened legal framework, a focus on fitness for purpose, and the adoption of the ADRI model, represent a dedicated effort to tackle long-standing systemic issues. However, the ultimate success of these initiatives hinges on a holistic and integrated approach that acknowledges their interconnectedness with cross-cutting challenges such as human capital, infrastructure and resources, the digital divide, organizational culture, resistance to change, and the balance between access and quality.

The transition from the HERQA framework to the ETA marks a significant and necessary advancement in Ethiopia's journey towards effective quality assurance in higher education. HERQA, despite laying foundational groundwork, was hampered by critical systemic flaws, including a lack of enforceable accountability, a narrow definition of quality, a fragmented framework, and limited program scope. These limitations highlighted the need for a comprehensive overhaul to move beyond superficial compliance to genuine quality enhancement.

The new ETA quality audit process directly addresses these fundamental shortcomings. By establishing a strengthened legal framework that explicitly ensures institutional accountability, broadening the concept of quality to include "fitness for purpose," and adopting the comprehensive and cyclical ADRI model, the ETA is strategically positioned to foster a more dynamic, integrated, and impactful quality assurance system. This strategic shift is indispensable for ensuring that HEIs not only meet rigorous internal standards but also contribute effectively to national development, directly addressing the historical challenge of massification over quality and producing graduates genuinely equipped for a competitive and evolving global landscape.

The effectiveness of these reforms is deeply intertwined. For instance, a stronger legal framework requires sufficient human capacity and resources for enforcement and monitoring. Similarly, achieving fitness for purpose necessitates qualified staff, adequate resources for quality education delivery, and a culture that embraces feedback. The data-intensive ADRI model, without substantial human and technological capacity, risks becoming a bureaucratic exercise with limited genuine impact. A fragmented approach will likely yield suboptimal results; therefore, a coordinated strategy is essential, ensuring that investments in human capital and infrastructure accompany legal reforms, and that a data-driven culture and strong digital infrastructure support the adoption of ADRI.

While adopting internationally recognized models like ADRI is crucial for aligning with global quality assurance trends, it's imperative to localize these frameworks. Quality assurance programs must be adapted to Ethiopia's specific socio-economic and cultural conditions, ensuring they are simple, modest in expectations, and realistic in requirements. Blindly transplanting models without careful adaptation to Ethiopia's unique context—including resource constraints, existing human capacity, and cultural dynamics—could lead to implementation failures. The success of ADRI will depend on Ethiopia's ability to genuinely "domesticate" this framework, ensuring it effectively serves local needs rather than becoming an additional bureaucratic burden.

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