ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Hidden Lacunae in the Ethiopian Higher Education Quality Imperatives: Stakeholders' Views and Commentaries

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Abstract

In the last two decades or so, much research has been carried out in the field of quality teaching and learning in higher education (HE). However, less is known about the state of quality and its contextual factors and outcomes, especially in the Ethiopian university context. This study examined the nature of quality teaching and learning and its associated factors and consequences in Ethiopian public university setting. It did so through a qualitative case study design which required approaching senior managers, education quality experts, students, and academic staff. In this article, the analysis follows a thematic analysis perspective so that the reported data provide contextual definitions and interpretations of quality teaching and learning in the HE setting. This study finding revealed a gap between policy and practice and deficits in quality, particularly in accountability, commitment, and educational processes. One of the remarkable results was a systemic failure to engage students in rigorous and relevant learning experiences. In addition, students' low level of academic engagement during their university years became apparent with diverging views amongst stakeholders regarding the ingredients leading to these shortages. This article proposes an increased emphasize to be vested in improving the conditions and further argues on shifting towards a perspective that value teacher implementation practices and students' learning experiences. It is thought that an increased emphasis on improvement provides the opportunity for HE institutions to interpret those factors surrounding their academic practices to concentrate on current realities within the prevailing context.

Keywords: *Ethiopia, quality teaching and learning, higher education,*
          stakeholder view

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BACKGROUND

Higher education (HE) plays an important role in contributing to national development(Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009)and in shaping up the future of the world society towards sustainable development(Koehn, 2012). It does so through generating new knowledge as well as contributing to the development of 21st-century skills and raising sustainability awareness among graduates(Rieckmann, 2012). As world economies increasingly become knowledge intensive, scientific knowledge, skills, high-order thinking, and innovativeness are becoming crucial, and it is through HE that nations cultivate such qualities(Sibbel, 2009).

With increasing need for more advanced knowledge and skills in the globalized economy, more and more people are looking for HE. In the last two decades or so, we have witnessed that the global HE landscape has been pressured by unprecedented student mobility and increasingly diverse student populations(Goastellec, 2008). In response to this, efforts have been made to find new ways of thinking about teaching and learning in HE (Maringe & Sing, 2014; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2012).

As HE expands its coverage, there is a growing concern about its quality and how it can be improved. This has posed a major challenge to governments in different national contexts on how to expand opportunities for HE, at the same time ensuring equity, relevance, and high quality. This concern can be systematically addressed not only through instituting quality assurance and accreditation, but also through improvement of governance and management of HE institutions, revising and updating curricula, and improving teaching and learning methods and materials(Hussey & Smith, 2010; Tadesse, 2015).Research suggests a realistic approach to address the quality problems through attempting to better understand the possible effects of cultural values, assumptions and practices(Chantal, Jules, & Joke, 2013).

Rationale

Mainly triggered by the globalized knowledge economy and the need to ensure social justice, the HE systems of many nations have necessitated a shifting away from elitist to mass HE system(Goastellec, 2008). Under this influence, most sub-Saharan Africa countries like Ethiopia have made a concerted effort to widen access to HE through increasing both the number of universities found across regions and the national enrollment capacity.

Following the establishment of a national quality assurance agency and the government growing commitment to standards-based reform, ensuring quality has become the common practice for dealing with the problems of quality in HE in Ethiopia(Teshome & Kebede, 2010). Through their rhetoric and spirited debates, many suggest that establishing a quality assurance system and aggressively working on new reform initiatives is the needed fix to Ethiopia's HE chronic quality problems(Yizengaw, 2007). These same individuals often highlight student failure and inequality; yet, little serious attention is given to address the underlying causes of these problems(Molla, 2013). Also, curriculum and pedagogic reform efforts made to end academic failure in HE in Ethiopia are fuelled largely from ideological and social pressures(Akalu, 2014; Semela, 2011) and not from an emphasis on academic achievement for all students(Tadesse, Manathunga, & Gillies, 2018), or from recommendations based on solid, empirical research(Tadesse, Mengistu, & Gorfu, 2016).

Despite national and institutional calls for student-centered learning and the prime importance of problem-based approach, a traditional pedagogic practice is commonplace in the HE institutions in Ethiopia(Tadesse & Melese, 2016; Zerihun, Beishuizen, & Van Os, 2012). Also, essential learning resources are not readily available, and the students' academic work most often depend on the teacher-made notes and other resources like handouts and modules for the most part. On top of that, an Ethiopian cluster-based in-service teacher professional development program did not effect change in the practices of student-centered pedagogies among the Ethiopian teachers(Piper, 2009). The above lines of argument highlight the quality gaps that appear potent on the surface.

In general, due to these and others, vigorous challenges have been placed upon the academic communities in Ethiopia (Areaya, 2010; Assefa, 2008; Semela, 2011; Tadesse et al., 2018). A study discloses the situation by revealing the tensions between conflicting issues like 'resources versus expansion; autonomy versus 'government knows best'; the country's needs for a professional workforce versus the need to maintain standards' (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2011).

Drawing upon evidence from some selected senior managers, students, teachers, and education quality experts, this study explored current debates regarding the quality of HE in Ethiopia to map out Ethiopian perspective concerning the state of quality teaching and learning. The aim was to obtain a holistic view of the conditions governing teaching and learning in the undergraduate programs, searching for patterns, and developing assertions that might be used to capture an in-depth understanding of the status quo. In doing so, the study addresses the following questions:

1. How do the stakeholders perceive the qualities of a good teacher and a good learner in the Ethiopian HE context?
2. What is the nature of teachers' pedagogical practices and students' learning experiences in the Ethiopian HE context?
3. What is the level of students' academic engagement in the Ethiopian HE context?
4. What factors affect students' academic engagement and how can students and academic staff members improve the quality of undergraduate education?

In this study, the term 'student engagement' refer to students' active participation in academic activities, as well as referring to the time and effort students spent on academic work both inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, 'student active participation' is defined as a student-driven behaviorto participating in the knowledge production process. Also, 'motivation' implies the individual intrinsic desire, interest, and readiness for learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). What and how much is learned is influenced by the learner's motivation. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks the learner perceives to be of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control.

METHODS
Research Design and Study Site
This study used a qualitative case study design. This approach was adopted because it has the capacity to provide thick descriptions of the issues under study(Yin, 2003), and capture differences in perspectives(Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007).

The studied university is a large public university located in the South-Western part of Ethiopia. This university is one of

the top-ranked public universities governed under the Federal Ministry of Education. This university has grown very rapidly and offers different undergraduate and graduate programs in 7 Colleges. In the academic year 2011/12, the university campus enrollment for the undergraduate programs was a total of 18,161 students. The proportion of women in the undergraduate programs and the academic staff is minimal, ranging between 10-20%.

Study Participants Selection
Two colleges, namely: College of Natural Sciences and College of Social Sciences and Law participated. The study participants were 20 students (8 Women & 12 Men) and 6 teachers (2 Women & 4 Men) representatives and gender focal persons at the college level, 2 College Deans and 2 Department Heads (Senior Managers), and 4 Education Quality Experts. Student and teacher representatives and gender focal persons at the college level were purposefully considered for inclusion since they have a direct link with issues under investigation. In total 8participantswere interviewed, and 26 participants (10 Women & 16 Men) were involved in the Focus Group Discussions(FGDs). Throughout the results and discussion session of this paper, a student is represented by (S), a teacher is represented by (T), Senior Manager is represented by (SM), and Education Quality Expert is represented by (EQE).

Data Collection Instruments
This study used interviews and FGDs to solicit the relevant data from the study participants. The different interview and FGD items were organized into three major areas, pertaining to the ideal state of quality teaching and learning, the actual teaching and learning experiences and student engagement. Items representing these three areas were similar in both data collection methods. While interviewing format was used to collect data from the college deans, department heads, and education quality experts, the FGD was used to collect data from teachers and students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
In order to organize the data, we read through the data line-by-line and think about the meaning of each word, sentence, and idea. Through a repeated process of summarizing and re-reading reports, the findings were analyzed to discern overarching themes that characterized the studied institution, at the same time, testing the constructions and interpretations of tentative claims against the collected evidences. In the final analysis, four working themes generated.

The first theme denotes attributes of desired qualities and manifestations of actual qualities by the current teaching forces and undergraduate students. The second theme represents those practices in the institution as well as conditions associated with student engagement and success. The third theme deals with the learning experience, students underwent during their undergraduate years and their level of engagement in educationally purposeful activities. The fourth theme highlights related factors influencing students' engagement and success. These themes were further broken down into sub-themes; the results of the study and the corresponding discussions are presented under each theme.

Attributes of personal qualities
This theme captured information related to the perceptions of the study participants regarding the desired qualities of an ideal teacher and student and whether or not such qualities were evident among teachers and undergraduate students. This was a key step in establishing empirical support

for emerging themes as well as acknowledging alternative perspectives and interpretations. The information was categorized according to whether it pertained to teachers or students. Here the details of the participants' perceptions a represented as follows.

Ideal qualities of a teacher and the actual profile of teachers

Four specific strands of information emerged from analysis of the qualitative data providing descriptions of the qualities of a good teacher. These strands were: subject area competence; personal attributes and dispositions; pedagogic practice, and professional accountability.

Subject area competence (Academic knowledge & levels of attainment)

The different study participant groups commonly agreed that one of the most important indicators of a teacher's quality is his/her subject area competence. This was explained in terms of a teacher's academic qualification and knowledge of subject matter, academic rank, research undertaken in the areas he or she taught, and subject matter competence. One of the senior managers (SM1) very well explained the importance of subject matter knowledge, when he says, *'The first thing is about the level of understanding of the subject matter the teacher has. Because you can teach if you know the subject, otherwise, it will be very difficult.* 'Virtually all students' participants of this study viewed that, teaching is about inspiring students in a particular domain of knowledge and the teacher's expertise in that domain is important. Parallel to the students view, teacher participants perceived that those teachers who have mastery of knowledge provide a good deal of the subject matter for the students. There is a similar tone regarding this in the literature on this field as subject matter

knowledge has been rated as one of the characteristics of effective teachers(Walker, 2008; Witcher et al., 2003).

Personal qualities and dispositions

In the views of a large majority of the study participants, including the students, teachers, senior managers and education quality experts, important attributes of a good teacher included teacher's motivation and commitment to teach. The other important aspects were 'having a sense of humor and concern for students' (S8 & S11), and 'his/her approachability, friendliness, and fairness' (S1, S5, T2, & T6). These descriptors can be considered as features related to a teacher's personalities that define what could be called a 'psychologically balanced teacher' (quite, calm, self-controlled and balanced) (Thomas, 2000) and characteristics of interactive teachers that represents ability to connect with students, and having a sense of extreme concern and commitment for the success of students(Watson, Miller, Davis, & Carter, 2010).

Pedagogic practices (Academic practice - Teaching skills and practices)

The study participants also valued a teacher's pedagogic practice as one of the essential qualities of a good teacher. This was explained in terms of the teacher's ability to present information clearly and intelligibly (S5 & S9, S12), knowledge of the theories of learning (T4), understanding student difference (T6), devising strategies to establish a fair and democratic classroom environment (SM1, EQE4, S1, S7, S18).Also, it includes a teacher's teaching and assessment methods (EQE1). Moreover, it includes an understanding of the context in which a teacher teaches and an understanding of his or her students (SM1). As one education quality expert described, without understanding the

context for teaching and learning, it would be very difficult to facilitate students learning and promote the attainment of the learning objectives (EQE2). Emphasizing on the communality of subject area competence and pedagogical skills, an education quality expert (EQE1) described the following.

> *Let us see the qualities of a good teacher. The first thing is about the level of understanding of the subject matter the teacher has. Because you can teach if you know the subject, otherwise, it will be very difficult. This can be said in terms of their status and qualification. So the first thing is that the teacher should have a sound knowledge about the subject matter. The other thing is about pedagogical skill. That teacher has to know how to deliver the contents to the students; really he or she has to know how to facilitate the students learning.*

Another senior manager (SM1) added:

> *The teacher should relate with his students. Sometimes you know, some or all professors, they are very much competent and they know a lot but when it comes to sharing that with their students or handling their students, they are not that related to their students. So they have to sense, their students' need. Because I remember a professor when I was studying for my undergraduate studies, I know, he was a very prominent professor, but then when it comes to the way he was delivering the lectures, it was, I would say, beyond our capacity by then like the professional students. So you need to understand the capacity of your students. You have to sense and relate to your students, if*

> *possible even, relate to each and every student.*

In general, the teacher pedagogic practice explains the teacher's facilitation roles in the teaching and learning process (EQE4). When this skill complements well with subject area knowledge, the resulting quality attributes of a teacher increases(Ryder, Banner, & Homer, 2014). However, this does not mean that other factors did not have influence. For example, quality teaching is partly dependent on curriculum characteristics (Harris, Cullen, & Hill, 2012).Thus, teacher pedagogical practices are not only a function of teacher competencies but also curriculum intent that will require that for learning objectives to be achieved, teachers and students should engage in specific teaching-learning activities(Tadesse & Melese, 2016).

Professional accountability
The participants also highlighted some features of professional accountability defining teacher quality, including his/her professional commitment, a sense of responsibility as a teacher, a sense of professional respect, meeting students and societal expectations as a teacher, concern for the high reputation of the department and the university at large, and meeting professional ethics. The overall desired qualities of a good teacher, as the participants suggested, encompass several attributes perhaps clustered around presentation of materials, personal attributes, knowledge of theories and learning and understanding how to apply and adjust theories according to the various contexts including class size and individual differences.

The study participants considered that the attributes of a good teacher as defined in this study were very limited in the existing

teaching cohorts with deficits being evident in the current teaching forces in the defined areas of personal qualities and dispositions, pedagogical practices, and professional accountability. Two participating senior managers (SM1 & SM2) and education quality experts (EQE3 &EQE4) supported the students' view that some teachers failed to be professionally accountable for engaging students in learning, failed to show concern for their students learning and practically did not provide time to support their students. In addition, it was considered that the current teaching forces severely lacked essential pedagogical skills to engage students and stimulate students' interest in learning (EQE1 & EQE2). For example, one of the education quality experts (EQE2) stated:

> *The university encourages active learning, in a sense, that students should actively participate in the teaching and learning process both within and outside the classroom. Even though it is stated in the university policy, the issue is that how far our teachers are experienced enough in developing activities and bring that to the classroom so that students will actively participated. And the experience so far shows that still students participation in class is very limited because our teaching is still teacher-centered.*

The other expert (EQE1) has a similar concern:

> *From the students' formal comments and from my own formal observations of teachers, I came to realize that teachers did provide assignments but they did not provide feedback to students on their performances. If teachers did not give feedback how did they know that their students were really learning well? Whether the activities they have performed were meaningful or not?*

From the above point of discussion, it seems doubtful on the practicality of the stated policy intentions, as they seem to fail to be actualized. As some participants of this study noted, there is still some deficit in the current teaching forces when it comes to issues of pedagogic practices, particularly in properly actualizing student-centered teaching and continues assessment strategies. This may be because the professional development practices of teachers may focus on delivering content rather than enhancing students learning (Tadesse & Gillies, 2015; Webster-Wright, 2009).

Though the curriculum is a focus of repeated reform in many countries, the enactment of such reforms within higher learning institutions rarely reflect the intended outcomes of curriculum designers(Kandlbinder, 2014; Tadesse & Melese, 2016). Part of the reasons for this incongruity may be the negative experiences of teachers in the enactment of externally driven curriculum reform (Alan & Ping Man, 2012; Chantal et al., 2013; Zimmerman, 2015). This is a very common experience for teachers in many HE systems(Kandlbinder, 2014), and one likely to highlight issues of professionalism and authority that are central to the work of teachers (Ryder, 2015).

Ideal qualities of a learner and the actual profile of Ethiopian undergraduate students

Four categories emerged from analysis of the qualitative data relating to the descriptions of the qualities of a good learner. These categories were: development and academic readiness; learning interest and commitment; current

academic and ethical experiences and learning accountability.

Developmental and academic readiness

The participants of this study agreed that a student needed to possess the required developmental and academic readiness to be successful in the courses. For this, one of the key qualities of a good student is motivation (T5 & S4). Unless a student is motivated, it would be very difficult to force him or her to learn (SM1). The other is learning interest, because without interest to learn, it would be very difficult to force them to learn (SM3, S1, & S2). But students will be interested in learning when they have the necessary background knowledge and academic competence (SM2, T4). As one education quality expert (EQE1) stated, *'…in order to learn something students need to be prepared for that. So some prior knowledge, prior information and prior experience are very important for them.'*

Learning interest and commitment

The other important student quality indicator was the students' learning interest and commitment. As the student participants valued, this quality consisted of several attributes such as compatibility of disciplinary choice, overall attitude towards learning, enthusiasm, perseverance, commitment, and goal orientation. Also, most of the teacher participants of this study commonly agreed that commitment is crucial for the attainment of learning objectives and to ensure courage for learning. While this is not adequate for meaningful learning, students should always inquire; they have to always ask both inside and outside the class to learn more (T1, T2, & T5). As one of the senior managers (SM1 & EQE2) stated, *'unless students ask, they just learn very little. Especially, take class lecture, for instance, in the class students should*

frequently ask their professor.' Thus curiosity is another important quality of a good learner.

Current academic and ethical experiences

The study participants also valued the importance of a student's current academic success and ethical commitment as one important dimension of learner's quality. In relation to this component, they stated different sub-components to differentiate this quality. These are the level of academic performance, class attendance, respect for rules and regulations, respect for other students and teachers, showing curiosity by asking questions, an interest in being challenged, seeking help, and demonstrating collegiality. Research shows that academic dishonesty deprives students of a quality education by denying them the resources needed to either prevent or reverse academic failure (Byrne & Trushell, 2013). Also, these can have a negative influence on students' motivation, attitudes toward learning and academic success (Imran & Nordin, 2013; Rettinger & Kramer, 2009; Tadesse & Getachew, 2010).

Accountability for learning

A large majority of the study participants described accountability for learning as one of the most important qualities of a good student. In the views of most of the student participants, this quality dimension was explained in terms of knowing their academic rights and responsibilities, accepting societal responsibilities, and tackling problems wisely. Similarly, most of the participating teachers and education quality experts described it as the ability to take personal responsibility for learning as a student, reflectiveness, adopting the good behavior, and having a sense of group responsibility and so forth. One of the senior managers' (SM3) view on this

matter was similar to the views stated above. As he said, 'students *are expected to learn by themselves. They are supposed to organize their own learning in such a way that they can prepare their own notes, make presentations, and do assignments'*.

The different participant groups, including the students, teachers, senior managers, and education quality experts, observed great deficits in these attributes amongst the undergraduate student in the studied context. More specifically, all the teacher participants commonly agreed that the current student cohort failed to live up to the stated four major quality categories with deficits being particularly evident in academic preparation, learning interest and commitment, and taking individual responsibility. The other participant groups (senior managers and education quality experts) also shared similar views.

Of course, personal qualities can be developed through immersion in a culture that values them. For example, with an academic culture that values commitment and positive relationship, it is likely that students might be nurtured into becoming passionate and caring about academic work (Albanese, Snow, Skochelak, Huggett, & Farrell, 2003).

The Conditions of Academic Engagement in the Ethiopian HE Context

The new HE proclamation has defined the standards related to students' behavior, teachers' rights and responsibilities and standards of classroom and assessment practices(FDRE, 2009).The national proclamation has declared the centrality of students' independent learning and the attainment of problem solving, critical thinking, analysis and synthesis. Also it has stated learner-centered methods and continuous assessment strategies to be used across the undergraduate curricula. The

same document has stipulated major responsibilities for teachers to make use of student-centered methods of instruction and continuous assessment strategies almost in every course. In keeping with this proclamation, the studied University revised its Senate legislations(Jimma University, 2010),and developed new quality assurance guidelines that mandate the utilization of student-centered methods and continuous assessment across the different colleges of the institution(Jimma University, 2011). These quality assurance guidelines involve detail information on how to apply student-centered methods and continuous assessment strategies, the expected standard criteria as well as teacher's duties and responsibilities.

In spite of these good intentions, the implementation of these policies has fallen short according to the participants in this study. This suggests the impotency of the policy to actualize the required changes into academic practice. This represents one of the key concerns in introducing educational reform in developing countries as it is often considered too complex to implement(Schweisfurth, 2011).

It is useful to explore further the issues of student-centeredness and continuous assessment policies and implementation from the perspective of the different stakeholders. SMs and EQEs considered policy making and communicating that policy to teachers as potentially having the power to change the academic practices in the studied colleges. They expressed optimism about the initial positive results achieved so far. Astonishingly, however, discussion with the students and teachers FGD participants on the same issues revealed flaws in the implementation aspects and the consequent negative results. Also stated was implementation constraints that stemmed from underlying assumptions, lack of accountability and a

commitment for improved teaching and learning (EQE3 & EQE4). Furthermore, there was more uncertainty on the relevance of the students' learning experiences due to a lack of evidence as well as perceived shallow assessment (EQE1 & EQE2). This indicates the gap between policy and practice as well as diverging views of stakeholders on the same issue.

Students' academic engagement in the Ethiopian HE context

The level of student engagement as revealed through the responses of most of the student participant groups was high with many of the students engaged in continuous assessment tasks, and regularly attended classes consisting of lectures and practical activities. Some senior managers and education quality experts partly concurred with this view attributing and explaining the level of engagement to the implementation of recent policies and practices(SM1, SM2, & EQE1). It is clear that there is a high degree of student engagement, but this engagement is perhaps disproportionately focused upon assessment requirements.

In contrast to the dominant student view of the level of engagement, the participant teachers strongly disagreed with their perspective, arguing instead, that the students' were passive consumers of the curriculum with the dominant learning mode being mechanical rehearsing. As they strongly argued, even the best students who were high achievers in their courses fell short in demonstrating the qualities expected of good students. A consistent comment by the participant teachers and some senior managers (SM1& SM4) and education quality experts (EQE2, EQE3,& EQE4) was that, '*students rely heavily on material assistance like lecture notes and handouts* 'and their mode of learning and studying was predominantly '*mechanical*

rehearsing' or '*rote memorization'*. As such, it is evident that students were not engaged in higher-order thinking requiring students' to move beyond 'mechanical rehearsing'.

While it is true that study skills are one essential ingredient for students' academic engagement in a rigorous and relevant academic experience, the students' low level of academic engagement could be attributed to other reasons. Research shows that students' difficulties with academic tasks often stem from their understanding of the nature of knowledge rather than from a lack of techniques (Wingate, 2006).

However, a further analysis of the qualitative data set indicated that there were some qualities the students exhibited, and this was witnessed by two interviewed senior managers and an education quality expert. While they did not deny the presence of students with low levels of academic engagement, these participants pointed out that some students actively participated in the different learning tasks, consistently looked for appropriate reference materials and came to class with relevant questions to solve (SM3 & SM4). Such students usually identified problem areas in the course, communicated these to the teachers in class, creatively designed original research ideas for their senior essay and conducted their studies successfully (SM3 & EQE4).

Regardless of these, however, most student participants commonly agreed that their academic engagement was constrained by several problems, including pressure experienced to cover content, meet continuous assessment tasks, and copy handouts; a lack of positive relationships between the students and the teachers; feeling burdened due to a lack of carefully planned assessment tasks and well prepared handouts; the perception that marking and scoring were applied unfairly; and the

experience of equal participation, particularly for female students being undermined.

Moreover, some education quality experts held the opinion that students exhibited low levels of engagement due to superficial assessment and the students' tendency to be test oriented (SM1, EQE1, &EQE2). Others felt that students spent little time on their learning and study (EQE3 & EQE4)while noting their passivity in the instructional process(T1, T6, S1, &EQE3, EQE4) gauged by the poor quality of their interactions with teachers and among peers in the classroom (T2, EQE3, &EQE4).The poor quality of assignments and research reports (SM3) and learning and studying that overemphasized low level of cognitive activities where 'mechanical rehearsing' was predominantly used (T4, T6, & SM4) were also expressed as areas of concern.

Good teaching is based on the belief that learning occurs as learners are actively involved in a process of constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving information(Huba & Freed, 2000). Learners are seen as the makers of meaning and knowledge through knowledge construction and not reproduction (Hennessey & Evans, 2006) and teaching entails providing activities, opportunities, tools and environments to encourage met acognition, self-analysis, regulation, reflection and awareness(Jones, Marrazo, & Love, 2008). However, when conditions for high-quality teaching and learning are crippled due to various reasons, as demonstrated in the current study, low level of engagement seems inevitable. It is believed that an understanding of either the dynamics of learning or relations of power is not enough to capture the flavor of quality improvement at the classroom level. Instead, the focus should be on a more robust understanding of the process and outcomes of implementation (Ryder, 2015).

In the next few pages, some of the factors that contribute to students' lack of engagement are discussed in greater depth.

Factors affecting student academic engagement in the HE context

The study participants highlighted several positive and negative factors influencing student academic engagement that compete to promote and undermine quality improvement. When the different factors the participants highlighted systematically organized they fall under four major categories. These include the personal factor, instructional factor, institutional factor, and systemic factor. In the discussions below, these factors are highlighted with examples provided from the participants' responses.

Personal/individual factors

Some participants disclosed the positive contributions of factors such as personal interest and commitment to learning, and teacher support and encouragement for students in the form of advice and informal feedback. However, other participants had the opinion that lack of concern and commitment for learning or inability to take responsibility for learning, social loafing, and failure to take responsibility for the students' engagement and learning (teacher skepticism) had strong negative influences on student academic engagement.

The findings of this study show contradictory views regarding the negative factors, which contribute for the dis-engagement of students, particularly between students and teachers. When the teacher FGD participants and students FGD participants were asked to identify the negative factors influencing students-disengagement, they respond quite in the opposite. The teachers FGD participants strongly argued that students' personal factors have contributed for their dis-

engagement, student FGD participants have the opinion that teacher and/or course related factors have the most influence. One of the teachers FGD participants (T6) strongly argued:

"Though I did not undertake research, most of the students are not considerate for their learning, be it in class or outside the class. In most cases, the students want to pass their exams and be graduated by any means. What is important to them is to have their degree. They don't care for their learning. In the past, there were group works, for instance, in that probably a student or two will do the job and the rest of the group members would secure marks or grades without effort. Even sometimes, students of different groups copied assignments or term papers one another. Copying works of each other during exam or in completing assignments is very common, particularly when the instructor is lenient, so that with little effort the students would secure "C" or "B" (good grades) and then they promote. Therefore, they used whatever means, for example, cheating, tending to make assessments in groups, absence from exam and seeking make-up exams, because they believe that make-up exams are by far easier than the regular exams. Anyhow, through different means they cheat and then get their degree. So in most cases the students are not considerate for their learning."

The other teacher FGD participant (T2) stated that lack of interest for learning is the main problem.

For example, students do not want to do laboratory works, spent their time doing assignments and other relevant activities. Unless you forced them they did not pay attention for their learning tasks. Generally students are more concerned to spend their time on the different techniques of cheating on exams rather than studying hard.

Senior Manager (SM1) strengthened the above concern: *"Although it might be difficult to over generalize, some students do not want to put extra effort. When you say you got to read this material, especially when the material is with a large volume, they don't feel comfortable.'* Also the students' dis-engagement was attributed to lack of the required study skills. A teacher FGD participant (T4) noted that students lack the required study skills to critically analyze and synthesize learning materials and to work independently as they commonly engage in mechanical rehearsing. Virtually all the teacher participants share this view. Contrary to this argument, the students' FGD participants have the opinion that the teacher and/or course related factors are the most influential for the students' dis-engagement. Of course, that does not mean all teachers since there are teachers who teach very well, considering students ability and background. Student FGD Participant (S17)

There is lack of good relationship with teachers. I mean, there is negative attitude of teachers for the students learning, for instance, a teacher said, you all have scored above 50 and even she has scored 51. Sometimes teachers prepare wrong exams like asking a simple rehearsing question by picking a word from the handout. The other includes dumping handouts from the internet and preparing unclear and voluminous handouts and distributing that towards the end of the semester may be after, make-up classes (One of

the students FGD participants from the College of Social Sciences and Law).

Another student FGD participant (S2) described the following related with course materials, particularly materials in the library.

Some of the course materials are very few compared with the number of students who took the course in the college. Due to this, some students could not prefer to stay in the library, if those books were occupied by some other students. Sometimes, the reference books stated in the course outline could not appear in the library. For example, in a certain course (x), we often missed books in the college library that were stated in the course outline.

Institutional factors

In reflecting on the institutional factors influencing student engagement at their respective colleges, the different participants of this study, identified several structural, policy and practice elements affecting the overall learning experience of the students and the quality of university teaching as well. While most of the student participants and interviewed senior managers capitalized on the 24 hours library service and considerable information communication technology (ICT) and internet facilities as positive influence, teacher participants recognized staff development opportunities as positive factors. Similarly, the most recognized positive influence, in the opinion of interviewed senior managers and education quality experts, is policies and guidelines supporting improvement and new initiatives. Regardless of these, however, limited institutional support for implementation of new reform initiatives, the dominance of normative academic processes (lecture-based instruction) within the institution, and unfairness particularly in marking and scoring were the major negative influences the study participants highlighted.

Systemic factors

Systemic factor refers to those concepts and ideas the participants pointed regarding the education system and its overall influence on teaching and learning. Senior managers and education quality experts highlighted the importance of current initiatives in revising policy and practice and mandating reform and innovation via a HE proclamation as positive influence. Regardless of this, virtually all teacher participants strongly argued on the systemic failure to promote students' academic engagement through rigorous and relevant activities, instead, the widespread of activities that encourage mechanical rehearsing across the education system. A repeated comment by most of the participants is a lack of students' competency at the time of entry due to under preparing. A teacher participant (T4) argued in favor of this.

I think the issue of engaging students has been a critical problem in our HE context. In my opinion, this has its roots in our education system. For example, in the entire school system, there is over reliance on spoon feeding (lecturing) and recitation. Because beginning from primary education up to preparatory (Grade 11-12), the students learning experience is characterized by mechanical rehearsing, quite often, guided by the teacher and over relaying on teachers' notes. When it comes to higher education, the learning system totally changes. But students lack the necessary skills to adjust themselves to the existing situation. For instance, we expect them to learn independently, to write report and things like that. My

question is do they have the required learning skills when they first join higher education? The answer is no. Therefore, most of the students are disengaged since they lack the necessary learning skills to cope with the existing realities of HE in Ethiopia.

Based on the above point of discussion, it is clear that the system needs a particular focus on students learning further than a superficial level of understanding. Attaining this is possible when the education system has taken students learning more seriously(Tabulawa, 2003, 2013). Research shows that students will learn more when the system has implemented policies and practices and cultivates academic cultures that encourage students to take advantage of a variety of educational opportunities (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Thus re-thinking the education system and looking for other alternative solutions needs serious concern and immediate response.

The experiences in high-performing education systems show that the systems often develop strategies for teacher professional learning with the purpose to improve the pedagogical practices and the learning experiences of students in the classroom (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016). In other words, the systems integrate both teacher professional learning and student outcomes within effective instructional design (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015). The strategies and policies that make professional learning effective include the formulation of a system in place to embed quality professional learning at the institution level (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011; Gibbs & Jenkins, 2014).

In exploring the factors accounting for the proper implementation of educational reform, studies provide a range of factors, including personal contexts specific to the teacher, internal contexts within the higher learning institutions, and external contexts extending beyond the institution, lives of teachers (Ryder & Banner, 2013; Tadesse & Gillies, 2015). The fact that reform ideals, in the Ethiopian HE setting, originate from the external could mean that the HE teacher should be both accountable to the external policy, at the same time, exercising authority over the detail of their practices. No doubt that the experiences of curriculum reform can extend beyond the learning of new knowledge and associated pedagogies to involve challenges to teachers' professional identities (Ryder & Banner, 2013).The proper implementation of such responsibilities can support teacher professionalism (Tadesse, 2015).

Research Limitations
Paying due consideration to the exploratory nature of the study and the scope and size of its sample, the results outlined in this study are tentative in nature. The fact that this study is a case study implies that the results cannot be generalized to the Ethiopian HE context. Nevertheless, the research findings can help to clarify the reasons hindering the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, and the corresponding factors surrounding the implementation of learner-centered teaching and assessment in other HE institutions. This clarification can serve as a guide to improve all the detected weaknesses, which may be applicable in other context nationally and beyond. It can also aid administrative bodies at the different HE institutions in dealing with the obstacles that restrict the workability of the leaner-centered and continuous assessment practices.

CONCLUSIONS

In the views of the participants of this study, a good teacher needs a range of quality attributes, including, at the simplest level, effective presentation skills, and at the highest level an understanding of the complex nature of teaching and learning within the prevailing context. Similarly, the study participants suggested that good students are characterized by several quality attributes that tap into the cognitive, social, ethical and practical dimensions. Unfortunately, most of the desired quality attributes of both from the teacher and learner perspectives have not been evident in the current teaching forces and undergraduate students. The study participants highlighted quality deficits in several domains, the major ones being the following:

1. A mismatch between policy and practice;
2. A deficit in the desired personal attributes of quality and the corresponding qualities demonstrated by teachers and students;
3. Incongruity between expected levels of accountability and the level of accountability demonstrated by the students and teachers;
4. Misalignment between student learning experience and student learning assessment;
5. Disparity between the academic preparations and learning opportunities before College and changed academic practices (more independent learning) during university years, and
6. A lack of coherence between the skills of mechanical rehearsing developed in previous years before College and the generic skills expected to be demonstrated during university years.

The findings of this study show that the culture of students' academic engagement is currently strongly associated with an agenda of passing exams and obtaining degrees. Individual skill deficiency as the chief explanation for problems of academic engagement has been negative and reductive with failures being attributed to the skill deficiencies of individuals. There are some diverging views, however between teachers and students, in matters relating to the factors affecting students' engagement in higher education. There are differences as well as between senior managers and education quality experts aligned against teachers and students in matters related to the current reform initiatives and the resultant effects on implementation.

As the evidence in this study shows, one of the serious problems in a university in Ethiopia is that the institution through an imposed academic standard and promotion policy, it tries to promote quality and ensure a sizable reduction in students' academic failure. Simply raising education standards and enforcing strict retention policies, however, will do little to ensure that the educational needs of large numbers of Ethiopian undergraduate students at risk for academic failure will be effectively addressed. Raising academic standards is a necessary but insufficient strategy for enhancing student academic achievement.

The intense focus on meeting the demands of continuous assessment and examination requirements, coupled with, a lack of active learning opportunities for students have resulted in increasing the number of students with a low level of engagement. In addition, students' lack of competency at the time of entry, their personal motives and commitment, and their reduced accountability for learning have intensified the problem.

Other factors associated with low level of students' academic engagement are the lack of desired teaching qualities of the current teaching forces, poor institutional

support, particularly in the areas of implementation, the inability of the education system to prepare students to cope with new challenges of college learning and study, while complicating all these problem areas are the socio-cultural realities of the country at large.

The prevailing socio-cultural context in Ethiopia is a constraint on teachers' and students' classroom pedagogical actions. As the HE institutions are considered a replication of the existing social structure they are potentially employing a pedagogical style that is helpful to the continued existence of that structure instead of promoting the applications of new pedagogical styles that are helpful to change the existing structure in the years to come. In this sense, it is possible to suggest that the socio-cultural context as a constraint on teachers' and students' classroom actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS
It is recommended that, the HE society must critically consider a number of complexities, yet interrelated, questions that will ultimately involve widespread efforts to find solutions that will fit the diverse contextual realities that exist in the Ethiopian HE sphere. In this regard, the major challenge is to create learning experiences that allow the integrity of all learners to be sustained while an environment is created for students to achieve high levels of success. The other issue is that institutions must create opportunity where teachers play their pedagogical roles with a high level of rigor and compassion and all students learn in a demanding academic routine.

To this end, institutions must be places where students want to attend because they feel nurtured, valued, and challenged, and where they engage in meaningful work that makes sense of their lived experiences.

Thus, HE institutions are viewed as transformative, not reproductive institutions. In this regard, the current reform movements and the establishment of quality assurance systems are not transformative strategies since neither helps prepare students for the challenges of this complex nature.

Instead, it is time to think of other possible solutions, at the same time, eliminating those institutional practices that hurt teachers and students. Literature suggests and it is strongly believed that doing so is not difficult to the extent that learner-centered education is contextualized and become an integral part of the day-to-day experiences of students, teachers, staff, and administrators in HE institutions.

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