

REDIET TESFAYE ABEBE

Trust Between Quality Assurance Agencies and Higher Education Institutions and its Implications for Quality Management Models

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Trust Between Quality Assurance Agencies and
Higher Education Institutions and its Implications
for Quality Management Models

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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Tampere, January 2021

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ABSTRACT

The present study has two aims. The first is to explore to what extent quality assurance agencies trust higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance in higher education. The other is to analyse what implications this may have for the nature of the quality management models used in higher education systems. In doing so, the study taps into relevant gaps in the literature and introduces an unexplored area of research in the quality assurance of higher education. The discussion on broad conceptual and theoretical issues pertaining to trust, accountability and quality assurance set the scene for the empirical inquiry which focused on the context of Ethiopian higher education.

Due to the lack of suitable and unified theories which could integrate the exploration of trust and quality management, the study constructed a theoretical and analytical framework through a review of relevant literature located within and outside higher education. This framework combined the conceptual dimensions of trust, perspectives on trust building, selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust, and quality management models.

The empirical investigation employed qualitative method. The study applied a multiple case study design consisting of six case higher education institutions that were carefully selected to draw a sample which more closely represents the nuances and institutional diversity present in Ethiopian higher education. The data collection relied on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion, numerous documents and additional secondary data from non-academic outlets. The extensive data gathered from primary and secondary sources was analysed thematically which involved with-in and cross-case analysis.

The study found that the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia (i.e. HERQA) attributes a contrasting overall trustworthiness to public and private institutions as explored based on the dimensions of concern, capacity, openness and risk. HERQA views public higher education institutions as more trustworthy compared to their private counterparts that are perceived negatively and with suspicion. The empirical evidence from the case studies, however, suggested that HERQA's trust in public institutions may have been misplaced. The study also revealed trends of widespread deception, dishonest reporting and violations of regulations among private

institutions. Their profit-maximisation motive is increasingly viewed as a major source of concerns for quality. Furthermore, it was found that HERQA's acute capacity limitations, application of dichotomous quality requirements for public and private institutions, perceived conflicts of interest and lack of autonomy and widespread allegations of corruption create barriers for higher education institutions to trust the agency.

The study findings further revealed that HERQA's weak trust in private institutions accounts for more demand for the use of control and regulation mechanisms, whereas the strong trust in public institutions explains its reliance more on the perceived shared values and norms. The findings indicated a combined application of the rationalist-instrumentalist and the normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building. Additionally, the previous experiences and encounters of HERQA's quality assurance experts with, be it, deception and violations of regulations or responsible operation and commendable commitment to quality seem to inform their expectations, vigilance and overall approach to subsequent evaluations. Moreover, the study revealed the dominance of the accountability-oriented quality management and the slow progress in quality enhancement. The contrasting trust attributed to public and private institutions seems to explain HERQA's application of dichotomous accreditation requirements and other discriminatory regulations for the two sectors. As such, private institutions are largely subjected to more accountability-oriented requirements in the form of stringent programme accreditation and surprise on-site inspections, while public institutions, until its recent discontinuation, have undergone a more enhancement-oriented evaluation of institutional quality audit.

The study concludes that trust could be a fundamental ingredient, but undoubtedly not the only factor, which may shape the nature of quality management models. The findings emphasise the continued significance of balancing the accountability and enhancement orientations in quality management to present-day higher education systems. The results from this study bear implications for theory, method, policy and practice and further research in the areas of trust and quality assurance. It highlights the overall scarcity of theoretical and empirical explorations of trust in higher education.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tällä tutkimuksella on kaksi tavoitetta. Tutkimuksen ensimmäisenä tavoitteena on selvittää, missä määrin laadunvarmistuksesta vastaavat toimijat luottavat korkeakouluihin korkeakoulutuksen laadun ja laadunvarmistuksen osalta. Tutkimuksen toisena tavoitteena on analysoida, mitä vaikutuksia tällä voi olla korkeakoulujärjestelmissä käytettävien laadunhallintamallien ominaispiirteisiin. Näiden tavoitteiden saavuttamiseksi tämä tutkimus paikkaa olemassa olevia aukkoja kirjallisuudessa ja tuo esille aiemmin kartoittamattoman tutkimusalueen korkeakoulutuksen laadunvarmistuksessa. Keskustelu laaja-alaisista luottamukseen, vastuuvellollisuuteen ja laadunvarmistukseen liittyvistä käsitteellisistä ja teoreettisista kysymyksistä luovat perustan empiiriselle tutkimukselle, joka toteutettiin Etiopian korkeakoulujärjestelmän kontekstissa.

Luottamukseen ja laadunhallinnan näkökulmat yhdistävien yhtenäisten teorioiden puuttuessa tässä tutkimuksessa muodostettiin teoreettinen ja analyttinen viitekehys, joka perustui korkeakoulututkimuksen ja sen ulkopuolisen kirjallisuuden läpikäyntiin. Tutkimuksen viitekehys on yhdistelmä luottamuksen käsitteen ulottuvuuksia, luottamuksen rakentamiseen liittyviä näkökulmia, valikoituja oivalluksia koskien Gamsonin valta- ja luottamusteoriaa sekä laadunhallintamallien muotoja.

Tutkimuksen empiirinen osuus toteutettiin laadullisin menetelmin. Tutkimuksessa sovellettiin monitapaustutkimukseen perustuvaa asetelmaa, jossa aineisto kerättiin kuudesta etiopialaisesta korkeakoulusta. Tapauksiksi valikoituneiden korkeakoulujen valinnassa kiinnitettiin erityistä huomiota otoksen edustavuuteen, koska sen tarkoituksena oli mahdollisimman tarkasti heijastella Etiopian korkeakoulujärjestelmän instituutiotason monimuotoisuutta. Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu puolistrukturoiduista haastatteluista ja fokusryhmäkeskusteluista, dokumenttiaineistosta sekä ei-akateemisista lähteistä koostetusta toissijaisesta aineistosta. Kokonaisuudessaan aineistoa analysoitiin temaattisesti. Analyysi sisälsi sekä tapauskohtaisia että tapausten välisiä osuuksia.

Tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että Etiopian kansallisella laadunvarmistustoimijalla (HERQA) on erilaisia näkemyksiä koskien julkisten ja yksityisten korkeakoulujen yleistä luotettavuutta, kun asiaa tarkasteltiin erilaisten ulottuvuuksien (huoli,

kapasiteetti, avoimuus ja riskit) kautta. Tutkimuksessa selvisi, että HERQA pitää julkisia korkeakouluja luotettavampina kuin yksityisiä korkeakouluja, joihin suhtaudutaan HERQA:ssa kielteisemmin ja epäluuloisemmin. Tapaustutkimuksista saatu empirinen näyttö kuitenkin viittaa siihen, että HERQA:n luottamus julkisiin korkeakouluihin on saattanut olla vähenemässä. Tutkimuksessa löydettiin näyttöä myös laajamittaisista väärinkäytöksistä, epärehellisestä raportoinnista ja erilaisten säännösten rikkomisesta yksityisten korkeakoulujen piirissä. Erityisesti yksityisten korkeakoulujen voitontavoittelun maksimointi nähtiin merkittävänä huolenaiheena laadun osalta. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa havaittiin, että HERQA:n oman toimintakapasiteetin rajallisuus, julkisille ja yksityisille korkeakouluille asetettujen laatuvaatimusten eritasoinen soveltaminen, havaitut eturistiriidat ja autonomian puute sekä laajalle levinneet korruptioepäilyt loivat korkeakouluille esteitä luottaa HERQA:an.

Tutkimus osoitti myös, että HERQA:n heikko luottamus yksityisiin korkeakouluihin lisäsi valvonta- ja sääntelymekanismien käytön tarvetta. Sen sijaan vahva luottamus julkisiin korkeakouluihin puolestaan selitti niiden osalta HERQA:n tukeutumista havaittuihin yhteisiin arvoihin ja normeihin. Saadut tulokset indikoivat rationalistis-instrumentalististen ja normatiivis-kognitiivisten mekanismien yhdistettyä soveltamista luottamuksen rakentamisessa. Lisäksi HERQAn laadunvarmistusasiantuntijoiden aiemmat kokemukset ja kohtaamiset – liittyivätpä ne sitten väärinkäytöksiin, sääntörikkomuksiin tai vaihtoehtoisesti vastuulliseen toimintaan ja kiitettävään sitoutumiseen laatutyöhön – näyttivät ohjaavaan heidän odotuksiaan, valppauden tasoaan ja yleisestä lähestymistapaansa myöhempien arviointien osalta. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa selvisi vastuuvollisuutta painottavan laadunhallinnan roolin määräävyys ja laadun kehittämistä painottavan roolin merkityksen edistymisen hitaus. Julkisiin ja yksityisiin korkeakouluihin kohdistunut, voimakkuudeltaan erasteinen luottamus näyttää selittävän HERQA:n toimintaa sen soveltaessa eritasoisia akkreditointivaatimuksia ja muita syrjiväksi tulkittavia säännöstöjä edellä mainittujen kahden sektorin välillä. Näin ollen yksityiset korkeakoulut ovat olleet enemmän vastuuvollisuutta korostavien arviointivaatimusten kohteena, kun taas julkisiin korkeakouluihin on sovellettu enemmän laadun kehittämistä painottavan lähestymistavan mukaisia korkeakoulukohtaisia arviointeja.

Tutkimuksen johtopäätöksenä on, että luottamus voi olla keskeinen tekijä – joskaan ei ainoa tekijä – joka voi muokata laadunhallintamallien ominaispiirteitä. Tulokset perusteella voidaan korostaa, että nykyisissä korkeakoulujärjestelmissä on edelleen tärkeää pyrkiä tasapainottamaan laadunhallinnan vastuullisuus- ja

kehittämisorientaatioita. Tutkimuksen tuloksilla on useita implikaatioita koskien teoriaa, menetelmiä, toimintapolitiikkoja ja käytäntöjä sekä jatkotutkimustarpeita luottamuksen ja laadunvarmistuksen alueilla. Samalla ne alleviivaavat luottamukseen kohdistuvien teoreettisten ja empiiristen tutkimusten vähäisyyttä korkeakoulutuksen kontekstissa.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Association of African Universities
ADEA	Association for the Development of Education in Africa
ADRC	Academic Development and Resource Centre
AUC	African Union Commission
BPR	Business Process Re-engineering
BSC	Balanced Score Card
CAMES	African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education
EAQAN	East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network
EDA	Education Development Army
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	Ethiopian Quality Award Organisation
ESC	Education Strategy Centre
ESDP	Education Section Development Programme
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GGP	Guidelines of Good Practices
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GTP	Growth and Transformation Plan
HERQA	Higher Education Quality and Relevance Agency
INQAAHE	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
IUCEA	Inter-University Council for East Africa
JEG	Job Evaluation and Grading
MOSHE	Ministry of Science and Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context of the research problem

The importance of studying the topic of quality and quality assurance in higher education is underscored by a number of major transformations that have been taking place over the past few decades. Higher education systems in several parts of the world have experienced a considerable degree of massification. This includes a rapid increase in the number of public and private higher education institutions, in their size of enrolment and in the diversification of their programmes to name a few aspects. This was accompanied by a growing recognition of the central role that higher education plays in development (e.g. Atkins et al., 1999; Dearing, 1997; Department for Education and Science [DES], 1991; Goddard et al., 1994; Hoare, 1991; McNay, 1994), particularly in today's knowledge-based and knowledge-driven economy and information society. Such transformations have directed increasing attention towards the social responsibilities of higher education institutions and the relevance of their curricula. The pressure on higher education to become responsive to the socio-economic needs of societies has grown in intensity.

Another major transformation has been the changing landscape of the relationship between governments and higher education institutions. The gradual shift from a regulative to a more supervisory role of the government gave rise to a greater requirement for universities to assure legal, financial and academic accountability. Due to such transformations, higher education institutions have been facing a substantial decline in public funding (e.g. Li & Zumeta, 2015). These new forms of managerialism (e.g. Brennan & Shah, 2000; Broucker & De Wit, 2015; Van Vught & De Boer, 2015) have seen trends of a decrease in rigid state regulation and an increase in institutional autonomy (e.g. Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; King, 2015; Lemaitre, 2002; Veiga et al., 2015) and financial autonomy (e.g. Jongbloed et al., 2000; Kohtamäki, 2009; Ordorika, 2003; Sheehan, 1997). With the advent of such transformations, issues regarding trust, accountability, efficiency and other critical challenges emerged (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Trow, 1996). Another transformation has been the unprecedented internationalisation of higher education (e.g. Gao et al.,

2015; Nokkala, 2007; Pinheiro et al., 2015; Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2015). Higher education systems across the globe have also been recently experiencing growing international pressure to build world-class research universities and centres of excellence. The effort exerted towards developing and reinforcing the competitive edge of national economies and innovation systems has been in the public limelight for a few years. The amalgamation of these and other such significant transformations explains the growing concern and interest among researchers, practitioners and decision-makers regarding the subject of quality.

The aforementioned transformations led to an increasing demand for systems of quality assurance and enhancement in higher education. The practice of formal quality assurance, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. It began in the developed world in the 1980s, mainly in the US and UK (Harvey, 2005; Williams & Harvey, 2015), as well as some other European countries, including but not limited to the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark (EURYDICE, 2000). As a result, a trend of initiating national and institutional systems for checking and monitoring the standard and quality of education, teaching, learning and research has been growing. A number of countries have set up national quality assurance agencies and require universities to have internal processes and practices of quality management in place (Brennan & Shah, 2000). This phenomenon was not confined to the developed countries in the West; over the recent decades, the practice of formal quality assurance has also been spreading to higher education systems in the developing world, including Sub-Saharan Africa (Shabani, 2013; Shabani et al., 2014), where, according to Materu (2007), the concerns regarding the quality of higher education have been pronounced. According to the latest figures, about 35 African countries currently have functioning national quality assurance bodies (AfriQAN, 2018), while some countries are working towards establishing such agencies. Okebukola (2009) and Kasozi (2014) also argue that an increasing number of African countries are moving towards adopting quality assurance policies and setting up some form of national and internal structures for quality assurance. Such developments at national level have been accompanied by the emergence of global, regional and sub-regional partnerships in quality assurance that provide a platform for international collaboration and the sharing of experiences. One good example of such initiatives is the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) that has continental and regional offshoots, such as the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) and other similar networks.

Aligning with this trend, the large-scale expansion of higher education in Ethiopia and the mounting pressure to address the concerns regarding the quality of education

forced the Ministry of Education (MoE) to initiate national and institutional systems for managing the relevance and quality of higher education. Despite a relatively short history of secular higher education (Saint, 2004), the sector has experienced an unprecedented expansion over the past two decades. This involved an increase in the number of public universities owned by the Ministry of Education, from only 6 to 50, and sector-owned public higher education institutions (HERQA, 2018; Hussien, 2019c). Further, it also included an increase in the number of accredited private higher education institutions, from just a handful to 227, that operate as a university, university college or college (HERQA, 2020). The size of the public and private higher education system, the geographical distribution of public higher education institutions, the scale of enrolment and diversification of the undergraduate and graduate programmes have all grown sharply.

The expansion was accompanied by a multitude of challenges with regard to the input, process and output aspects of higher education. For instance, higher education suffered from an acute shortage of qualified academic staff, funds, facilities and resources, problems in teaching and learning practices and poor research performance in the course of the expansion (e.g. Van Deuren et al., 2016; Zerihun et al., 2011). The study conducted by Leka (2009) highlighted the mismatch between the higher education expansion and the intake capacity in Ethiopia, whereas Kahsay (2012) and Chala (2014) revealed that the inadequacies of educational inputs and processes impede the quality of training and outputs of student learning in the country. The dissatisfaction with regard to transforming the cognitive capabilities of students and equipping them with essential knowledge, critical thinking and problem-solving skills has evidently increased. The declining employability and debilitating fitness of graduates also emerged as other challenges to the rapidly expanding higher education system. The growing pressure to properly manage these concerns provided the main thrust for setting up a Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) and institutional quality assurance structures in the public and private higher education institutions in the country.

Additionally, the existing national policy framework, covering major sectors such as education, science and technology and economy, articulates the need to strategically arrest the declining quality and improve the overall standards and societal impacts of higher education. For instance, the Growth and Transformation Plan-II recognises the ineffectiveness of the previous efforts put into overcoming the challenges of quality and calls for a more systematic intervention (FDRE, 2016). Ethiopia's progress in increasing access to higher education has not been in alignment with the developments in the quality of education and student learning

(World Bank, 2017). Moreover, ensuring the quality of education is a task that countries around the world are expected to undertake as a part of realising the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ratified by the United Nations (UN General Assembly, 2015). Such national and global policy agendas provide additional justification for studying the issue of quality in higher education. This also indicates that quality and quality assurance constitute a pertinent topic of research in the context of Ethiopia.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to explore the trust between the two major actors of the quality assurance system in Ethiopia, i.e. the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions, and analyse the implications this may have for the nature of the quality management models implemented in the country's rapidly developing higher education system.

1.2 Problem statement

The description of the research problem presents a brief review of previous studies on the topic of quality and quality assurance and identifies the relevant gaps and formulates the main research questions this investigation pursues. It sheds light on the justifications that led to the focus on trust and quality management models.

1.2.1 Relevant academic, theoretical and empirical gaps in literature

In consideration of the gaps identified in the literature, the present study focuses on exploring the extent to which quality assurance agencies trust higher education institutions and its implications for the nature of quality management models. Accordingly, four key gaps that highlight the relevance of the present study were drawn from the review of literature that were published on the context of Ethiopian and global higher education systems. First, the focus of this study is justified by the overall scarcity of studies into the landscape of the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. Further, a discussion of the trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions is lacking in the literature. Second, the motivation for conducting this study also stems from the inadequate theoretical and empirical understanding that exists regarding the complex trust issues that are present in quality assurance despite the fact that trust constitutes a crucial ingredient for the functioning of higher education institutions

and quality assurance processes. This study, thus, engages such a relatively underexploited area of research and attempts to investigate the theoretical and empirical interconnections between trust and quality management within the context of the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. Third, the lack of relevant and unified theories for exploring trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and analysing its implications for the nature of the quality management models provides an opportunity for a creative and inter-disciplinary construction of a theoretical and analytical framework that can be applied in empirical investigations. Fourth, the focus of much of the literature on quality assurance in higher education thus far seems to have been mainly limited to the developed world (US and Western European perspectives). This highlights the existing empirical gap regarding Africa and reaffirms the necessity of studies, such as the present research, that investigate trust in relation to quality management models in the context of an emerging and rapidly expanding higher education system.

The following sections discuss in detail how the aforementioned gaps in the literature were identified and how they provide a rationale and foundation for this study. Accordingly, an overview of previous studies is discussed in an attempt to assess the aspects that have been studied, how they have been studied and, most importantly, which aspects have not been studied. This discussion further highlights the academic, empirical, and theoretical gaps which justify the present study. This section begins with a review of previous studies on the topic of quality, quality assurance and other issues related to quality of education that were conducted within the context of Ethiopian higher education. It then attempts to briefly outline studies that focus on topics of external quality assurance conducted by quality assurance agencies and internal quality assurance carried out at higher education institutions in the global context.

The identification of gaps in existing studies on quality in the Ethiopian higher education was largely based on a review of empirical studies and journal articles. The empirical studies mainly comprised those research works such as doctoral dissertations and master's theses which more explicitly relied on collecting primary and secondary information, and involved employing accepted qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis, applying relevant theoretical and analytical frameworks to explain findings and generally observing scientific rigour. The category of journal articles consisted those scholarly works which based their discussion on a systematic review of policies, implementation of reforms, relevant literature and reflection on the trends of development often presented in a

conceptual or philosophical, argumentative, critique or other format. These works were published in various national and international peer-reviewed journals in higher education.

Empirical studies on quality and quality assurance in the context of Ethiopia. The researcher reviewed seven doctoral dissertations written on topics related to quality and quality assurance in Ethiopia. For instance, there are studies that investigated the adoption of formal quality assurance (Kahsay, 2012), implementation of policy frameworks related to quality assurance (Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Saketa, 2014), role and implications of institutional governance in quality assurance (Bassa, 2014; Yirdaw, 2014), and perceptions regarding service quality at higher education institutions (Lodesso, 2012). With the exception of the study conducted by Yirdaw (2014), which lacks any guiding theoretical or analytical framework and does not carefully adhere to the norms of scientific investigation, the other six dissertations used a mixed research method. Further, three of these works (Kahsay, 2012; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014) combined the contingency and neo-institutional theories for their theoretical framework. Saketa (2014) attempted to draw on a combination of neo-institutional theory, resources dependence theory, bureaucratic politics and decision-making process models but hardly applied them meaningfully in its empirical analysis. In addition, these works tend to emphasise the study of university-specific and external environment-related factors associated with quality assurance, institutional practice of quality assurance and perceived impacts of quality assurance. This was at least partially attempted in the works of Geda (2014), Girma (2014), and Saketa (2014). These studies also limited their research contexts to public higher education institutions and paid little attention to the private sector, except for the works of Yirdaw (2014) and Saketa (2014).

Quality in Ethiopian higher education has been the subject of investigation of some master's theses. For example, the issues studied included the accreditation procedures applied in private higher education institutions (Bekele, 2009), the procedures of quality audits (Weldemariam, 2008) and the institutionalisation of quality assurance (Abebe, 2014). The first work uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, while the other two employ a qualitative method. Despite the variations in their research methods and areas of focus, these studies are essentially descriptive in nature. They seem to lack an interpretive and critical approach to engaging the problem under investigation.

A number of other studies have also attempted to investigate various aspects of quality and quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education. These include studies on the relevance of curricula (Asgedom, 2009), intake capacity (Leka, 2009), training,

workload and performance of the teaching personnel (Yimam, 2009), standards of the pre-university preparations of students (Nega, 2009), quality of education, research and services (Regassa et al., 2013), education quality indicators (Shibeshi et al., 2009) and quality assurance practices and accreditation (Woldetensae, 2009).

Journal articles in the context of quality assurance in Ethiopia. On the other hand, some journal articles discussed the challenges posed by massification for the quality of education (Akalu, 2014; Alemu, 2010; Areaya, 2011; Ashcroft, 2010; Mekasha, 2005; Semela, 2011; Tessema, 2009; Van Deuren et al., 2016), the emergence, purposes and practices of quality assurance models (Adamu & Addamu, 2012; Ashcroft, 2003; Ashcroft & Ryner, 2012) and student guidance counselling for improving the quality of education (Seyoum, 2011). In addition, Abebe (2015b) analysed the strategic imbalances and key challenges associated with quality assurance at national and institutional levels in Ethiopia.

In general, the local studies seem to be occupied with exploring the status and experience levels with regard to quality assurance activities, procedures and instruments employed to assure quality. They are also focused on the factors that either enable or hinder the implementation of policy frameworks and the overall development of a robust quality assurance system at national and institutional levels. The number of studies on the topic of higher education quality seems to be on the rise. The issue of quality (quality management, quality assurance, service quality, etc.) is gradually permeating the realm of higher education research in Ethiopia.

Although the characteristics of each of the aforementioned category of studies tend to vary significantly from each other, the relevant academic, empirical and theoretical gaps identified in the brief review of the previous studies on the quality of Ethiopian higher education can be summarised as follows:

- 1) The trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions, and the implications it has for the nature of the quality management model implemented in the Ethiopian higher education system are largely missing in previous studies. Some studies (e.g. Abebe, 2014, 2015b; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kahsay, 2012) have stated the nature of the existing relationship between the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) (i.e. the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia) and higher education institutions and their internal quality assurance structures as one of the key challenges that hinder the effective implementation of policy frameworks that seek to address issues of quality in higher education. Beyond making passing remarks, virtually no available study thoroughly investigated the nature of the relationship between the two main actors in the quality assurance of higher education. There is a lack of deeper evidence-based analysis

beyond some of the previous studies labelling the relationship as ‘bureaucratic’ (Kahsay, 2012), ‘fragile’ and ‘top-down’ (Geda, 2014), ‘authoritative’ (Abebe, 2014, 2015b) and ‘discriminatory’ (Woldetensae, 2009). On the contrary, the study conducted by Grima (2014) reported on the gradual penetration of mutual trust and collaboration into the functional and managerial relationship between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions. Such mixed findings further underscore the need for more studies to uncover the precise nature of the relationship. In addition, the extent of the trust between the two actors and the implications this may have for the nature of the quality management model being used also needs to be examined. Further reaffirming the relevance of this study, the work of Abebe (2014)¹, at the end of its analysis, calls for further studies to examine the relationship landscape between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions.

2) Most previous studies seem to limit their scope of investigation to overlapping themes. For instance, topics such as the institutional systems and practices of quality assurance; implementation of policy frameworks for quality; standards of input, process and output of higher education; relevance of curricula; tensions between massification and quality; and other related issues have evidently remained recurrent subjects of previous research works. However, important issues related to the nature of the relationship between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions, implications that trust has for the nature of quality management models or explanations for the current state of the existing quality management model, the fundamental issue behind implementing different quality assurance requirements for public and private higher education institutions, and other aspects have been overlooked.

3) There is great unexplored potential for studying in detail the differential approaches of the quality agency to private and public higher education institutions. This line of inquiry has not been exhaustively pursued, and a number of studies (e.g. Adamu & Addamu, 2012; Akalu, 2014; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kahasay, 2012; Lodesso, 2012; Saketa, 2014; Semela, 2011; Weldemariam, 2008; Woldetensae, 2009) seemed to limit their analysis to simply pointing to the fact that only private higher education institutions are required by law to undergo institutional and programme-

¹ Predicating its analysis on a single anonymous public university, the study indicated that the defining feature of the relationship between the quality agency and the case institution is that the former issues the instructions and guidelines and gives assignments, whereas the latter passively abides by these directives and reports on the assignments. It was found that the correspondence between the two structures was not established on a level ground. The study then suggested further research to thoroughly investigate the landscape of the relationship.

level accreditation, while their public counterparts are exempted from such stringent requirements. This differential practice is sometimes referred as double practice and dichotomy. The tendency of the government to tighten its grip on private higher education institutions, for instance, through the Ministry of Education has also been indicated in the work of Teferra (2005). In spite of the divergence regarding the accreditation requirements, both public and private higher education institutions conduct institutional quality audits or self-evaluations, but the roots and implications of the two-faced quality management requirements in Ethiopian higher education remain unexplored.

4) The review of previous studies identified the poor practice of utilising local studies for framing research problems. The reviewed works relied heavily on international studies conducted elsewhere. While identifying the relevant gaps and framing the focus of their investigation, studies failed to be informed by the focus, theoretical framework, methodology and findings of the previous studies carried out on the topic of quality in the context of Ethiopian higher education. This could partly explain why the reviewed studies hardly avoided repeating what was already studied by others.

5) A considerable number of the reviewed studies tend to pursue broad and overly descriptive lines of inquiries. There seems to be a tendency of failing to maintain a narrow focus for the research problems. This appears to limit the analysis of information to a surface-level discussion and renders it challenging to engage the topic under investigation with more diligence and thoroughness. Even worse, some studies failed, in certain cases, to answer some of the research questions they had posed at the outset because they pursued what seemed to be unmanageable and diverging lines of inquiries. Moreover, there has been a prevalence of overly descriptive analysis with insufficient critical probing and questioning of surface-level findings. In most instances, studies tended to limit their discussion to simply restating what was stated in the cited works and avoided critically reviewing and assessing them. Most previous studies appeared to concentrate more on describing issues at the expense of interpretative and critical approaches.

6) There is a tendency of predominantly employing a mixed research method. A considerable proportion of previous empirical studies (e.g. Bassa, 2014; Bekele, 2009; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Lodesso, 2012; Saketa, 2014; Shibeshi et al., 2009) analysed their empirical data both quantitatively and qualitatively. It can be argued that there is more room for qualitative studies that could be better positioned to provide an in-depth analysis of the problems under investigation. In addition to this, the review of previous studies has pointed to the frequent use of questionnaire

as a crucial instrument for collecting empirical data. The use of interviews and focus group discussions was found to be limited to only a few studies.

7) Another relevant gap that deserves to be mentioned is the weak practical application and, in most cases, complete avoidance of theoretical and analytical frameworks when conducting studies on the topic of quality. From the briefly reviewed studies, only four doctoral dissertations, namely those by Kahsay (2012), Lodesso (2012), Girma (2014), and Geda (2014), attempted to incorporate theoretical and analytical frameworks. Even in these studies, except the first one, it was found that the adopted theoretical abstractions and analytical frameworks were hardly applied in practically shaping the perspectives of the research, analysing the problem under investigation or interpreting the empirical findings. The data analysis and discussion of findings was not meaningfully guided by these frameworks. The theories appear to be incorporated more for the sake of formality than for practical application. In addition, three of the aforementioned works, namely those of Kahsay (2012), Girma (2014) and Geda (2014), combined the contingency and institutional theories to form their theoretical framework. Although the institutional theory can offer useful theoretical and empirical insights into understanding a wide range of issues in higher education, trying to explain almost every problem using this theory alone could pose risk for the future of higher education research. It is evident from this that diversifying the theories could provide novel insights and exploit previously unexplored perspectives. Despite similar developments in Europe (Cai & Mehar, 2015), theories other than the currently trending institutional theory need to be explored and included in higher education research.

8) The review also indicated the marginalisation of private higher education institutions from the research on quality of higher education in Ethiopia. An overwhelming majority of previous studies have focused on public higher education institutions. Exception to this include a few studies that were either exclusively set in the context of private higher education institutions (e.g. Bekele, 2009; Mersha, 2006; Tilahun, 2006; Woldetensae, 2006; Yirdaw, 2014) or included private institutions along with public ones in their study sample (e.g. Girma, 2014; Solomon, 2006).

Journal articles on quality and quality assurance in the global context. With respect to international studies that focused on external and internal quality assurance², it seems

² Those international studies that discuss the topic of quality and quality assurance in general were not included in this brief review of international studies. The review instead concentrated on those studies that, in one way or another, link the external quality assurance carried out by quality assurance agencies with internal quality assurance processes, institutional practices or higher education institutions in

that the most common theme of investigation relates to the impact of the external quality assurance carried out by quality assurance agencies in higher education institutions. Within this broader theme are studies that analyse several aspects of external quality assurance, such as its organisational impact (Stensaker & Leiber, 2015), institutional consequences (Rosa et al., 2006), utility to institutional change (Stensaker, 1999), impact on programme development (Gerbic & Kranenburg, 2003), impact on internal quality evaluation processes and enhancement of teaching and learning (Horsburgh, 1997; Tavares et al., 2016), impact on institutional autonomy (Jacobs, 1998), impacts of different types of external quality monitoring and how different stakeholders perceive the impacts of external quality assurance (Stensaker et al., 2011) and overall impact on higher education institutions (Carr et al., 2005; Harvey, 2006; Kristensen, 1997; Lemaitre, 2004; Newton, 1999; Shah, 2012, 2013; Silva et al., 1997; Smith, 1997; Stensaker, 2003; Veiga et al., 2011). Other studies focus on the methodological approaches used for evaluating the impacts of external quality assurance (Bejan et al., 2015; Damian et al., 2015; Kajaste et al., 2015; Leiber et al., 2015). The work of Jeliazkova (2002) describes how recommendations from the external review are interpreted and put into practice at higher education institutions. These studies on the impacts of external quality assurance appear to have been conducted in three waves: the first was in the late 1990s; the second around the mid-2000s, and the third around the early and mid-2010s.

The second area of research that was the subject of a sizeable number of studies is associated with issues related to the practice of external quality assurance. In this category of studies, a number of research works can be found that investigate, for example, national and international external quality evaluations (Vengris, 1997; Woodhouse, 2006), the relationship between national quality assurance agencies and the government (Hou et al., 2020), the quality of quality assurance agencies (Woodhouse, 2004), the challenges in organising external and internal evaluations (Bazargan, 2007), the practice of reciprocity in education evaluations (Leeuw, 2002), transforming the practice of external quality evaluation (Dill, 2010; Gynnild, 2007; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Szanto, 2005), codes of practice and guidelines of external quality assurance agencies (Aelterman, 2006; INQAAHE, 2006; Morse, 2006), the transferability of best practices in quality assurance (Houston & Maniku, 2005) and the international trends in external quality assurance (Billing, 2004; Stensaker et al., 2008). Still, certain studies concentrate their analysis specifically on external

general. These studies were considered to be more relevant for identifying the gaps that can be used to frame an investigation into the trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and its implications for the nature of the quality management models implemented in a higher education system.

reviewers. These works delve into the use of practitioners as external examiners (Gaunt, 1999), the training of external reviewers (Silva-Trivino & Ramirez-Gatica, 2004) and the professionalism of external quality assurance practitioners (Cheung, 2015).

Other than the two dominant themes found in the previous research, there exists a vast repertoire of literature that discusses other relevant issues associated with quality assurance. In this regard, the tensions between the accountability and improvement requirements of quality assurance have been a subject of frequent study (e.g. Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey, 1998, 2002; Thune, 1997; Vroeijsstijn & Acherman, 1990; Vroeijsstijn, 1995). Some studies also extended their discussion to the challenge of balancing external and internal quality assurance (Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Genis, 2002; Kristensen, 2010). The work of Kettunen (2012) examines external and internal quality assurance from the perspective of process management, whereas Naidoo (2013) tends to focus more on the relationship between external quality assurance and organisational culture. The issue of the professionalism of external quality assurance practitioners was analysed by Cheung (2015). Another interesting study conducted by Stensaker and Maassen (2015) discusses the use of quality assurance for building more trust in transnational higher education programmes. From this discussion, it is therefore possible to deduce the scarcity of studies that focus on thoroughly investigating the trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, as well as its implications for the nature of quality management models implemented in a higher education system. The Guidelines for Good Practices adopted by INQAAHE provide key principles, among other things, for guiding the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions (INQAAHE, 2006; Morse, 2006).

The review of these international studies indicated the frequent use of qualitative research methods (e.g. Billing, 2004; Carr et al., 2005; Cheung, 2015; Horsburgh, 1997; Kettunen, 2012; Kristensen, 1997; Leeuw, 2002; Naidoo, 2013; Shah, 2012; Silva et al., 1997; Stensaker, 2003; Stensaker et al., 2011; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Vengris, 1997). The next preferred method appears to be the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g. Bloxham et al., 2015; Newton, 1999; Shah, 2013; Smith, 1997; Tavares & Amaral, 2006).

On the other hand, the review could not find any commonly used theory, analytical framework, or concept used to study the issues related to the external quality assurance carried out by quality assurance agencies and internal quality assurance at higher education institutions. Researchers tend to employ different

models and frameworks in their work. Some of these theoretical and conceptual frameworks include impact evaluation (Damian et al., 2015; Kajaste et al., 2015), accountability and control versus improvement framework (Horsburgh, 1997; Kristensen, 1997; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990; Vroeijenstijn, 1995), model for analysing recommendations from external reviews (Jeliazkova, 2002), cultural theory (Veiga et al., 2011), causal social mechanism (Leiber et al., 2015), pragmatism (Ansah, 2015), principal-agent theory (Borgos, 2013)³, organisational dimensions (Stensaker & Leiber, 2015), critical systems thinking (Houston & Maniku, 2005), process management framework (Kettunen, 2012), perspectives on trust-building (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015), social mapping and repertory grid technique (Bloxham et al., 2015), concept of professional competencies (Cheung, 2015), concept of institutional autonomy (Jacobs, 1998), concept of student learning and theories of learning (Gynnild, 2007), evidence-based restructuring framework (Smith, 1997), concept of reciprocity and independence (Leeuw, 2002), meta-theoretical analysis (Naidoo, 2013) and other concepts and analytical models. In this regard, there seems to be more potential for well-developed theories or analytical frameworks from other disciplines to be adopted into studying the trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions.

In terms of geographic distribution, first, a majority of the reviewed international studies focused on Europe and the UK (e.g. Bejan et al., 2015; Damian et al., 2015; Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Gaunt, 1999; Gynnild, 2007; Jeliazkova, 2002; Kajaste et al., 2015; Kettunen, 2012; Kristensen, 1997, 2010; Leeuw, 2002; Newton, 1999; Rosa et al., 2006; Stensaker, 1999; Stensaker et al., 2008; Stensaker et al., 2011; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Veiga et al., 2011; Vengris, 1997). Second, several studies were set in international and cross-continental contexts (e.g. Aelterman, 2006; Billing, 2004; Bloxham et al., 2015; Cheung, 2015; Harvey, 2006; Stensaker, 2003; Szanto, 2005). Third, some studies analysed quality and quality assurance in the context of Australia and New Zealand (e.g. Carr et al., 2005; Gerbic & Kranenburg, 2003; Horsburgh, 1997; Shah, 2012, 2013; Woodhouse, 2006). Thus, it can be deduced that few studies

³ This study did not fully utilise the agency theory. It exclusively focused on the assumptions of the informational asymmetry and goal conflict while ignoring the financial and economic aspect of the agency relationship and other key assumptions, such as agency variables, agency cost, and mechanisms used for governing agency problems. The validity of this critique can be substantiated by evidence found in the existing literature on the agency theory, such as in the work of Kivistö (2007) and Kivistö and Zalyevska (2015), which clearly argues that the prominent advantages of the agency theory lie in the insights it offers for understanding the economic behaviour of the agent.

were conducted in the context of Africa⁴ and other parts of the developing world. This empirical gap reaffirms the relevance of studying the extent of trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and its implications for the nature of quality management models in the context of a higher education system undergoing rapid massification.

A review of the literature related to trust in higher education suggests that there is an encouraging attempt, although not yet properly established, to include the discussion of trust in quality assurance (e.g. Amaral et al., 2009; Bergan, 2012; Hoecht, 2006; Huber, 2013; Jackson, 1998; Singh, 2012; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Sultan & Wong, 2013)⁵. However, none of these studies delve into the issue of trust in the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. The review also showed that issues of governance, such as those associated with accountability, management and leadership, constitute the most common themes in relation to which higher education studies have discussed trust. The other frequent theme is the exploration of trust within the interaction between higher education institutions and external stakeholders such as governments, industries, markets, media, students and the public but not quality assurance agencies. In terms of the nature of the analysis, the review identified only a small number of empirical studies that investigated trust in the context of higher education (Aasen & Stensaker, 2007; Hansen et al., 2019; Hoecht, 2006; Martins & Nunes, 2016; Michael & Schwartz, 1999; Michael et al., 2000; Michael et al., 2001; Nevzat et al., 2016; Perin et al., 2012; Sultan & Wong, 2013; Yankech, 2015). Moreover, the literature review could not identify well-established and widely applied theoretical or analytical frameworks in higher education studies involving theoretical and empirical analysis of trust. It seems that most higher education studies that investigated trust tended to lack a conceptually and theoretically systematic analysis of trust. Additionally, the review found that the studies have used diverse levels of analysis. Despite the system level of analysis appearing to be the most commonly employed method, some studies also relied on an institutional (organisational) level of analysis, an individual level of analysis and a combination of different levels of analysis (for instance, individual and institutional levels or system and institutional levels). Furthermore, most of the reviewed works employed a qualitative analysis, while only

⁴ Although this review was able to find a scant number of studies that analyse the issues of quality assurance from an African perspective, a majority of them (e.g. Genis, 2002; Jacobs, 1998; Naidoo, 2013) were conducted in the context of South Africa, which relatively has a considerably well-developed higher education system as compared to most other countries in the continent.

⁵ A detailed discussion on the application of trust in higher education studies can be found in Chapter Four, section 4.7.

a few empirical works adopted quantitative and mixed research methods. This suggests the existence of well-established experience with investigating the concept of trust in higher education through qualitative methods.

As far as the geographic settings of the reviewed works is concerned, most higher education studies investigated trust within specific national contexts, while some extended their discussion to international settings (e.g. Amaral et al., 2009; Hansen et al., 2019; Trow, 1996) and global contexts (Bird, 2013; Bloxham, 2012; Enders, 2013; Engwall & Scott, 2013; Huber, 2013; Phelps & Campbell, 2012; Spier, 2013; Weingart, 2013). The number of higher education studies that analyse issues of trust at the continental level is also on the rise.

1.2.2 Research questions

In light of the main academic, empirical and theoretical gaps identified through the review of previous studies, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1) To what extent does the quality assurance agency of Ethiopia trust higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education?
- 2) What implications does the extent to which the quality assurance agency of Ethiopia trusts higher education institutions have for the nature of the quality management model implemented in Ethiopian higher education?

This study explores the extent to which the quality assurance agency of Ethiopia trusts the country's higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education based on an assessment of the four key dimensions of trust: concern, capacity, openness and risk. A description of the conceptual dimensions of trust and the relationship that each dimension has with the overall level of trust are discussed in detail in Chapter Five, section 5.2. This study seeks to establish whether the landscape of the relationship between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions is characterised by strong trust or an atmosphere of weak trust and suspicion. In addition to the empirical analysis, the discussions in Chapters Two, Three, Four and Six provide useful conceptual and contextual insights into the nature of trust, quality, quality assurance, links and tensions between external and internal quality assurance. They also address the issues of trust and accountability in the relationship between higher education institutions and external stakeholders, such as governments, ministries and quality assurance

agencies. The insights from these chapters contribute to better understanding the landscape of the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and how this relationship, along with the key issues and demands involved in it, evolved over time.

After carefully exploring the overall extent to which the quality assurance agency trusts the higher education institutions with respect to quality and quality assurance, the second research question directs the line of inquiry towards identifying and analysing the possible implications that the extent of this trust may have for the nature and driving purpose of the quality management model implemented to address quality concerns. This is analysed using a combination of the perspectives on trust-building, insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust and models of quality management, which together formulate the theoretical and analytical framework employed in this study⁶.

With the support of the theoretical and analytical framework, the second research question tries to analyse whether the quality management model implemented by the quality assurance agency of Ethiopia for higher education institutions is driven by accountability and control or enhancement motives. This study intends to capture how the public-private dichotomy in the quality assurance requirements in Ethiopia may be reflected in the possible differences in the trust relations with the quality assurance agency and the nature of the quality management model put in place for the two sectors. This research seeks to examine and explain the differences in the trust relations between the quality assurance agency and public higher education institutions, on one hand, and between the quality assurance agency and private higher education institutions on the other.

In addition to the empirical analysis presented in Chapters Eight and Nine, Chapter Three (e.g. sections 3.2 and 3.5) assists in deepening the understanding of key issues such as the thrust behind the advent of formal quality assurance in higher education and the links and tensions between the accountability and enhancement purposes that it serves. Further, Chapter Six (e.g. sections 6.2 and 6.4) discusses the acute quality concerns that account for the growing pressure to ensure the relevance and quality of higher education in Ethiopia; the national and international influence, pressure and transformations that facilitated formal quality assurance mechanisms; and the historical account of the emergence of external and internal quality assurance procedures. The aforementioned chapters contribute to an increased understanding

⁶ These theoretical and analytical models are presented in greater detail in Chapter Five, sections 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5.

of how and why quality assurance came into existence and of the objective it has been tasked to fulfil, both globally and in the context of Ethiopia.

The goal of the second research question is not to examine the causal relationship between the extent of the trust and the nature of quality management model. This study maintains a cautious approach to avoid implying an investigation of the impact, effect or influence of trust on quality management models. Instead, it intends to explore the extent to which the quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions and analyse the implications that the extent of this trust has for the nature of the quality management model being implemented in Ethiopian higher education⁷. The intention is to analyse how the extent of this trust can explain why the nature and fundamental purpose of the quality management model in use has been the way it is.

The theoretical and analytical framework applied in this study is constructed by integrating four separate models into a unified theoretical and analytical framework. This was crucial because answering the two research questions required drawing on a combination of perspectives, as each available model, when considered separately, lacks comprehensiveness. This approach to constructing a framework is justified by the theoretical gap that was identified previously from the literature review. This indicated the scarcity of relevant, comprehensive and suitable theories in higher education literature that could link the investigation of trust and quality management models as explored in the context of a relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. Moreover, the integration of multiple models is expected to further support theory triangulation.

This study recognises that the discussion of the theoretical and analytical framework presented in Chapter Five is broader than the scope and depth of its application in the empirical investigation of the two research questions. This has been done in consideration of the broader potential significance the framework could have for studies on trust in the context of higher education in contrast to the relatively context-bound relevance of the specific empirical findings generated from the data analysis.

⁷ Nickerson (2010, p. 594) differentiated implication from inference, underlining that implication signifies a 'logical relationship' while inference is a 'cognitive act' of justifying a claim or conclusion by appealing to other premises.

1.3 Motivations of the study

This study draws on academic, theoretical, empirical and practical motivations. Academically, this study delves into an underexploited theme of research in the quality assurance of higher education, i.e. the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, which are the two major actors directly involved in the system and institutional-level efforts for assuring and enhancing quality. As illustrated by the analysis of the literature review that was conducted to identify relevant gaps, the issue of the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions has been generally overlooked and excluded from thorough investigation. Thus, this study attempts to bring the concept of trust to quality and quality assurance in higher education and links trust to quality management models. This theoretical and empirical discussions could offer insights into how the varying levels of trust may have implications for the nature of quality management models and the fundamental purposes that the quality management models serve and the quality concerns they address. This study also seeks to initiate further discussion on the issues of trust in quality assurance, on how the emergence of quality assurance corresponds to the trust crisis in higher education, on quality assurance being an integral component of the broader accountability instruments implemented in higher education and on how quality assurance can help restore the public's trust in higher education. Moreover, this study generally seeks to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the area of quality assurance in higher education and, particularly, in the understanding of the role of trust in the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and its implications for shaping the nature of quality management models.

The present study is also driven by a theoretical motivation to generate fresh insights into the link between trust and quality management models. It aims to achieve this by adopting relevant conceptual, theoretical and analytical models from other disciplines and integrating them into a relatively coherent framework that can be applied in empirical investigations in higher education research. This is expected to contribute to theoretical developments in the field of higher education, advance theoretical diversity within higher education research⁸ and strengthen the interdisciplinary feature of higher education research.

⁸ This is achieved by employing previously unexplored theoretical and analytical models rather than relying on the popular institutional theory, which may limit the range of the theoretical insights that are accessible to higher education research.

Empirically, this study intends to generate evidence that can shed light on the trust relationship between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions and how this may be linked to the nature of the quality management model being implemented in the context of an aggressively expanding higher education system. It also seeks to build more knowledge regarding the status of the trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions in Ethiopia. The evidence from this study is intended to contribute to the quality management efforts in higher education systems with similar contexts, such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa, and other emerging higher education systems elsewhere.

From a practical point of view, this study is driven by the motivation to contribute to better understanding and addressing the challenges in the quality assurance at the national and institutional levels. It seeks to shed light on how the accountability and enhancement purposes in quality management could be balanced. Overall, the study aims to provide useful inputs for the governance and policy-making processes in higher education.

1.4 Delimitation of this study

The scope of this study is confined to examining the extent to which a quality assurance agency in Ethiopia trusts higher education institutions with respect to quality and quality assurance of higher education and the possible implications this may have for the nature of the quality management models implemented. The primary focus of the inquiry is neither on investigating how external and internal quality assurance is implemented nor on the practices, methods and strategies associated with quality assurance.

This study does not intend to directly examine the relationship between governments and higher education institutions despite acknowledging that governments are key actors in the quality assurance of higher education. They may influence the managerial and operational aspects of quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and provide the overall legal framework within which both these entities function. This study follows the perspective that quality assurance agencies function as intermediaries between governments and higher education institutions, which enables the perception of the relationship between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies as a part of the broader government-university relationship. The study also recognises that the relationship between governments and higher education institutions, in most cases, can have

direct implications for higher education systems, such as that of Ethiopia. This is true for countries where quality assurance agencies are established with statutes and are funded by and accountable to ministries or other relevant branches of government that are responsible for overseeing higher education. In such cases, the government's policies, priorities and agendas may be reflected in the governance and operations of quality assurance agencies.

The empirical discussion of this study may be more relevant for higher education systems where quality assurance agencies are initiated, governed, funded and accountable to governments and ministries and where the primary mandate of these agencies focuses on regulating and enforcing regulations on quality in higher education institutions. It may offer limited insight into quality assurance systems where quality assurance agencies may exercise a substantial degree of managerial and operational autonomy.

The study does not cover Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) since the quality assurance agency does not have mandate to regulate the relevance and quality of these institutions. Additionally, the context of trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions does not encompass the external evaluation of the peer institutional ranking practices organised by the Consortium of Ethiopian Public University (CEPU). Further, the internal quality assurance processes are mainly analysed in relation to their regulative links with the quality assurance agency.

Moreover, this study does not address issues of trust at an individual or group level. Instead, the scope of the empirical analysis is confined to analysing trust in the context of inter-organisational and system-level relationships, where higher education institutions interact with quality assurance agencies regarding matters related to quality assurance and enhancement of higher education. Unless specifically mentioned otherwise, the analysis of trust at an individual level is beyond the considerations of this study.

Providing an in-depth account of trust and distrust within a single study can be a considerable challenge, although doing so can undeniably contribute to a comprehensive analysis. For studies, such as this one, that are primarily concerned with trust instead of distrust, it is considered useful to refrain from stretching the discussion to an unmanageable scope by attempting to address distrust. This study adopts the stance that it may be reasonable to avoid explicitly engaging distrust and mistrust⁹ while providing adequate reflections on distrust where necessary and taking

⁹ The complex and, at times, confusing interplay between the concepts of trust and distrust, and sometimes mistrust, is discussed in Chapter Two, section 2.3.

precautions to not confuse the absence of trust or low trust with distrust, as is the case with several studies. This could help maintain a consistent approach throughout the study, especially when constructing a theoretical and analytical framework and analysing and interpreting empirical data. Regardless of these apparent issues with attempting to provide a unified and in-depth account of trust and distrust within the same study, this study concedes that a more comprehensive understanding of distrust is essential and can enrich the overall discussion on trust.

1.5 Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is organised in ten chapters in a manner that seeks to ensure the logical order and coherence of the discussions on the various components of the study. Such a structure was followed in order to first establish the objectives of the study and the necessary conceptual and theoretical foundations of trust and quality assurance through an extensive and critical literature review. This provides the groundwork for the discussion of the theoretical and analytical framework and the methodological approaches that guide the empirical analysis of data. The structure of the dissertation also consists of a section that intends to familiarise the readers with Ethiopian higher education, as this context constitutes the focus of the empirical investigation. Once such conceptual, theoretical and methodological subjects are adequately addressed, the dissertation proceeds to a detailed empirical analysis of the data based on the two research questions and highlights the implications of the findings.

Accordingly, the first chapter introduces the research problem and sets the focus of the study. The second chapter presents the conceptual overview of trust, whereas the third chapter provides an extensive discussion of the conceptual foundations of quality and quality assurance and the links between the external and internal quality assurance employed in higher education. The fourth chapter deals with broad issues of trust and accountability in higher education, and this serves to link trust to quality assurance. The theoretical and analytical framework that guides the empirical investigation of the present study is extensively discussed in chapter five. Quality assurance in the Ethiopian higher education as the main research context is described in chapter six. Chapter seven outlines the overall methodological approaches of the study with appropriate justifications. Moreover, chapter eight and nine present and discuss the data analysis on the two main research questions. Accordingly, chapter eight analyses the extent to which the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia trust

higher education institutions with respect to quality and quality assurance of higher education, whereas chapter nine delves into the implications that the extent of trust may have for the nature of quality management model implemented in the Ethiopian higher education. The dissertation concludes by highlighting the key academic, theoretical and practical implications of the findings. The dissertation, despite being lengthy, uses more informative headings and subheadings and frequent cross-section references to link ideas discussed in various chapters.

2 CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF TRUST

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a conceptual overview of trust, since a discussion of the trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and its possible implications for quality management models requires a deeper understanding of trust. It begins by providing an in-depth discussion of the contested conceptualisations of trust. It then draws distinction between trust and other similar notions such as predictability, cooperation, reliance and confidence. As part of an effort to achieve a relative conceptual clarity on the meaning of trust, the chapter then clarifies the concept of distrust and the complex conceptual interplay it has with trust. This is followed by an account of the key characteristics of trust which shows that trust can be subjective, bi-directional, asymmetric, non-transitive, context-dependence, and dynamic. The chapter also describes the antecedents of trust, which are considered as dispositions and grounds that lead to the formation of trust or explain on what basis actors establish trust. It discusses six main categories such as dispositional, cognition-based, institutional, knowledge-based, calculative, and identification-based trust antecedents. Last, it concludes by highlighting the relevance of key points of the chapter to the main research questions of the study. In general, this chapter reviews conceptualisations of trust and explicates a range of important conceptual and theoretical issues related to trust. This provides the foundation for the theoretical and analytical framework, discussed in Chapter Five, which guides the empirical investigation of the study.

2.1 The contested nature of trust

A literature review on the understanding of the concept of trust indicates the existence of considerable ambiguity (e.g. Leveille, 2006; Li et al., 2012; Pope, 2004). There is lack of consensus on its exact meaning and how it should be defined. Approaches towards operationally measuring trust and theorisations on how it can be developed are other areas where differences exist. This can be seen in some of the definitions given by some authors who conducted theoretical and empirical investigation on the concept. For instance, Mayer et al. (1995) defined trust as ‘the

willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party' (p. 712). In this definition, emphasis is placed, in addition to its existence, on the willingness to take some perceived risk that is associated with the perceived actions of the other actor, which may not be monitored. Another example, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) analysed trust relationships from perspectives of, what could be seen as, morality and communication. The conceptual framework applied in the study accords special attention to morality, such that making honest efforts and commitment to carrying out tasks, making fair dealings and negotiations, and refraining from taking excessive advantage over the other actor. Some of these ideas were borrowed from the work of Cummings and Bromiley (1996). In addition to issues of morality, the study measured level of trust through analysing communication behaviours (across time, space and culture) of the actors involved in the relationship. Moreover, in an attempt to develop a comprehensive conceptual model for understanding trust, Migliore and DeClouette (2011) proposed a definition that explains trust mainly as the positive expectation that the perceived competence of another actor will produce positive outcomes. This closely resembles Cook and Wall's (1980) definition of trust which views trust as an actor's willingness to ascribe good intentions and rest confidence on the behaviour of another actor. Additionally, in the article review Phelps and Campbell (2012) conducted, the concept of trust is explained using such as shared values, communication, benefits obtained by the actors involved in a relationship, commitment and other components. These examples reiterate the existence of ambiguity in what trust exactly means and aspects it encompasses and excludes. A table which summarises the diverse conceptualisations of trust found in the literature is included in appendix 1.

The existence of contested conceptualisations of trust does not however mean that there are no aspects commonly used in defining the concept. In fact, the review of literature on trust pointed to three common aspects:

- 1) trust exists and develops in relationships that involve two or more actors, which assume roles of a trustor and trustee. Hardin (2002) and Schoorman et al. (2007) emphasise the relational nature of trust, that is, the importance of understanding trust as an aspect of relationship. It is impossible to talk about trust independent of relationships. This indicates the value of conceptualising trust as a relational and social orientation (Kramer, 1999). Trust depends on the relationship one has directly or indirectly with another (Hardin, 2002). Trust cannot be established where relationship between actors is non-existent or is limited to a

passing interaction. It is equally impossible to discuss about relationship without actors or structures that engage in some form of interaction, transaction, or exchange.

2) the majority of the definitions tend to have pedigree in explaining trust in relation to vulnerability, or risk and uncertainty, which becomes the main concern in the relationship between actors. The perceived risk was mostly explicitly emphasised and, in few cases, implicitly suggested. Jalava (2006) and Mayer et al. (1995) accentuate the importance and increasing trend of positioning the element of risk and uncertainty at the core of conceptualising trust. Trust inherently involves taking risk for the probability that those we trust may fail to act in ways that is compatible to our interest, if not behave contrary to the expectations we hold of them. Uncertainty and risk are seen as inherently embedded in the conceptual foundations of trust (Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999)¹⁰. Some even argue that there would be no need for trust between actors if no potential risk and vulnerability is involved in the relationship between the actors (Moorman et al., 1993; Moorman et al., 1992). The vulnerability aspect of trust is also seen in terms of the trustor transferring certain degree of control over to the trustee. In other words, there is always something to be risked by trusting and hence reducing level of control over the other actor.

3) the willingness and voluntary decision, on grounds of a rational assessment, of the trustor to take the perceived risk and uncertainty associated with the perceived intentions, ability and behaviour of the trustee, regardless of the ability and level of monitoring. Pope (2004) puts this notion as a 'consensual dependence' (p. 76). Speaking in general terms, the decision to trust and therefore willingly assume any perceived risk could be explained as a product of rational and calculative thinking or a development of shared norms, values, expectations, and identity, or somewhere along the continuum between these two extreme explanations.

It therefore becomes evident that the relational element, issue of uncertainty and willingness to assume perceived risk come across as recurring themes in majority of the definitions of trust forwarded by several researchers. Similarly, commonality across most definitions of trust include interdependence between a trustor and trustee, a trustor voluntarily assuming some degree of risk involved in an interaction

¹⁰ The element of risk and uncertainty are seen as crucial conditions that must be fulfilled for trust is said to exist. However, it is also argued that taking a given risk must originate from an assessment, on the part of the trustor, that its interests are encapsulated within the interests of the trusted (Hardin, 2002). We are not trusting others when we are surrendering discretion to them to affect our interests in the absence of us making rational assessments, for instance as a result of coercion or other deterministic circumstances we may be subjected to, where our compliance is purely motivated by the genuine concern we have with our own interests and not with those of the other actor.

and trust serves as a tool to deal with such risk and uncertainty, and trustor's vulnerability due to the possibility of a trustee taking advantage of the trust (Lane, 1998).

The literature shows that trust can be analysed at various levels, such as individual, group, organisation, and institution (Mishra, 1996; Soloducho-Pelc, 2017). Trust can also be seen in terms of inter-personal, system, and dispositional categories (Leimeister et al., 2005). Interpersonal trust takes place in a relationship between individuals, where the trustworthiness depends on the intentions, competence, and dependability of individuals involved. On the other hand, system trust refers to trust in systems and institutions, where trustworthiness is assessed in relation to the existence and perceived reliability of robust network of institutional and structural constraints, such as laws and regulation, and the extent to which a given situation is understood to be normal. It is also called institution-based or institutional trust (Li et al., 2012). The category of dispositional trust entails the general propensity and attitude to trust and assume risks, and the nature of strategies employed by actors to seek outcomes that are favourable to their interests. The fact that this category of trust is understood independent from any specific actor and context explains why it is sometimes considered as basic trust (Leimeister et al., 2005). The theoretical discussions of Hardin (2002) also extend the notion of institutional trust to a concept that broadly incorporates trust in key social institutions (such as politics, economy, military) and professions (for example, physicians, engineers, lawyers). It posits that the trust in professions is regulated by market reputation, motivational commitment and professional codes of ethics, certification of qualification and institutional oversight by external sanctioning institutions such as professional associations. This indicates the importance of external inducements that serve to regulate and exert pressure on professionals to act in accordance with accepted norms, which signals a degree of trustworthiness in the eyes of the general population and consumers of their professional service. Although trust as a concept has similar features across these various categories and levels of analysis, its specific nature and characteristics may significantly vary across different levels of analysis and contexts at hand. These categories of trust are also seen, to some extent, as mutually exclusive.

An interesting conceptualisation proposed by Hardin (2002) perceives trust as an 'encapsulated interest', contending the view of narrowly confining trust a rational calculation of the motivations of others, and underscoring that trust more broadly extends to our analysis of the interests we believe that others have to behave in our best interest that involves examining the incentives we assume that others have to be trustworthy to us, which is argued to rest on the interest others have to maintain

the relationship they have with us. This perspective embeds self-interest into the conceptual construct of trust, where the trustee has own interest in taking the trustor's interest into account, thereby understanding trust essentially through embedding our own interest in the self-interest of those we choose to trust. It however does not mean the two actors necessarily share similar interests.

The understanding of trust as an encapsulated interest also recognises that those we trust make efforts to act in ways that fit with our interest although they may be conflicting to their self-interests. This analysis rests on the assumption that those we trust value the continuation of the relationship they have with us, which is seen as the crucial source of incentive for them behaving in a manner that duly puts our interests into consideration, although they may not necessarily be entirely compatible to their self-interest. Having an incentive to sustain a given relationship, for example for various kinds of benefits, is in this case argued to be the minimal condition for establishing trustworthiness (Hardin, 2002). The interest of whom we trust in maintaining a relationship, more than our expectations of their behaviour, provides an incentive to those we trust to honour our interest and intention even though it may come into conflict with theirs. Therefore, trust is said to be established when the self-interest of those we choose to trust encapsulates ours, that is when we assume that others have interest in fulfilling our interests and when they value sustaining the relationship, thereby formulating the ground for trustworthiness.

However, the mere compatibility, at least partially, of interests between the trustor and trustee is insufficient for establishing trust if it is not complemented with the commitment of the trustee to the continuation of a given relationship (Hardin, 2002)¹¹. In this case, rational expectations of compatibility in incentive and commitment becomes crucial, thus perceiving trust as having rational, normative and cognitive dimensions. Such perspectives are useful for understanding trust in various settings, since any claim of trust is specific to particular actors involved and relationships and matters under question. This is the context-specific nature of trust (Li et al., 2012).

The rationality of trust also entails that the expectations one has towards the behaviour of another is based on its rational, not a generalised, belief and assessment about their morality, self-interest, incentive, or reciprocity (Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Zucker, 1986). The rationality mainly embodies two main elements: the knowledge the trustor has about the interests, expectations and morality of the

¹¹ It is important to draw attention to the rather informal and conceptually ungrounded use of trust in everyday life, which has proximity to mere expectations concerning others' behaviour than an articulated assessment of encapsulated interest.

trustee, and the incentives the trustee has to fulfil the expectations and trust of the trustor (Hardin, 2002). In the context of such theorisation, trust is said to develop between actors under circumstances where the belief and knowledge one has about the other signifies a reasonable degree of trustworthiness, and where there are enough incentives, at least, expectations for one to trust the other. It is argued that actors trust those they know best (Hawley, 2014). A mere expectation of behaviour upon others, without any assessment of the extent to which it is in their interest to respect and fulfil our interests, does not meet the rational prerequisites of trust. The capacity of a given actor to rationally assess the trustworthiness of others develops through daily interactions and experiences. The rational theory perspective also posits that one's propensity to trust others mainly involves assessing the potential benefits and costs of trusting and cooperating in a given context (Bachmann, 2001; De Boer, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Li et al., 2012; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Sztompka, 1999; Zucker, 1986).

In stark contrast to trust as an encapsulated interest with sufficient rational basis, another alternative conceptualisation, often popular in the political science and business and marketing literature, advances the view of 'generalised trust' which presupposes that an actor generally trusts another or any other actor that it encounters, with little consideration of the particular issues at hand (Hardin, 2002). This is essentially a notion that generalised trust in other people whom we have no or little prior information is possible and that it can contribute to building well-functioning societies (Dinesen, 2012). This notion is sometimes referred to as dispositional trust and basic trust. The underlying assumption of this perspective of understanding trust emphasises that other actors are generally trustworthy and hence they should be trusted, and that trusting others could lead to positive outcomes regardless of the nature of the other actors, issue at hand, context of relationship, or any other factor (Leimeister et al., 2005, p. 103). Trust in such sense is seen to be hardly impacted by any circumstance. This seems to be a loose conceptualisation of trust that significantly deviates from the notion that the development of trust is considerably dependent on the particular identity of the trustee and specific object of trust.

The concept of generalised trust has significant limitations with respect to conceptual clarity and empirical application. Some authors, such as Hardin (2002) also criticise the notion of generalised trust as an elliptical claim, pointing to its underlying simplistic form of expectation of behaviour rather than providing an account of a relationship that commands a richer dimension of trust and commitment. Additionally, the notion of trust viewed as a global attitude and

affection to generalised others has less relevance in predicting outcomes than the conception of trust as specific in nature to situational and cognitive components (Butler, 1991; Scott, 1980). The notion of generalised trust prevents a contextually specific application and meaningful discussion of the concept in ways that respond to the nuances of diverse circumstances. The conceptual, theoretical and empirical application of such conceptualisations of trust in higher education research hence becomes simplistic and generic, but significantly problematic, since this conceptualisation is not suited to capture for instance the plurality of stakeholders in a higher education system and their competing, if not sometimes conflicting, interests on a range of key issues, such as quality and quality assurance, nuances within system and institutional level actors, and the fundamental characteristics and missions of higher education institutions. Thus, the notion of trust that is found to be more suited to theoretical and empirical applications in higher education research is expected to approach the meaning of trust as deeply rooted in the specific context within which it is analysed, thereby attaching significance to the characters of the actors involved, nature of the relationship they have, particular object of trust and the overall context at hand. This allows for a more flexible and realistic analysis.

The concept of trust is multifaceted as it encompasses a wide range of components that cater explanation for different contexts. For instance, Mayer et al. (1995) proposed a model of trust where trustors' propensity of trust is mainly influenced by the interrelationship between the ability, integrity and benevolence of the trustee and the perceived risk at stake. Some of the key elements that constitute trust include the expectation and assessment of intentions and behaviour and competence of the trustee to behave or act in accordance with these expectations (De Boer, 2002; Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Hardin, 2002; Mishra, 1996; Pope, 2004). These facets could be used in measuring perceived trustworthiness and help understand why some actors could be trusted more or less than others. However, determining the competence of those we consider to trust is a challenging task. The fact that the specific nature of trust is subjected to the specific actors in a relationship, characteristics of the relationship existing between these actors and particular issues over which trust is considered makes problematic the application of a common mechanism for assessing the extent to which those we consider to trust possess the competence to do what we expect of them.

Moreover, trust can also be one-way and two-way (Hardin, 2002). The concept of one-way trust assumes an actor trusting another actor in an asymmetrical relationship that lacks an element of a richer ongoing mutual exchange, and mostly occurring within the context of an ordinary exchange, where the risk mainly rests

with the trustor, and the trustee may or may not have the incentive to be trustworthy. The model is often applied in behavioural experiments such as the prisoner's dilemma. On the other hand, a two-way trust or mutual trust assumes actors trusting each other and both putting themselves at risk, and yet both having built-in incentives to reciprocate trustworthiness to the other actor, in an ongoing symmetrical and mutual exchange, where the actors expect to encounter each other again. The two-way trust notion provides explanation to much of the experience most actors encounter with others though it does not fully capture the definition of trust.

Furthermore, by expanding on the notions of trust as a one-part (i.e. proponents of the concept of 'generalised trust') and two-part relation, Hardin (2002) theorises that trust could be perceived as a three-part relation, which includes the trustor, trustee and the object of trust. At the core of these three parts is the argument that trust depends on a specific context. This entails that a specific trustor trusts a specific actor in relation to a specific matter. Therefore, a specific trustor does not trust all parties, and may not trust the same actor in relation to all matters: trusting a specific actor in relation to one object may not necessarily guarantee the same trustor trusting the same actor over another matter. Nor does it mean an actor trusted by a particular actor will also be trusted by other actors in relation to the same matter.

2.2 Distinction between trust and other similar notions

The relationship between trust and other often interchangeably used notions such as confidence, reliance, predictability, faith and cooperation tend to be confusing and unclear. Faced with such complexity and paradox in nomenclature, some authors have attempted to explain how trust is seen to be different from other similar notions. A notable example can be Mayer et al. (1995, p. 712-714) which drew distinctions between the concept of trust and other terms such as cooperation (between the trustor and trustee), confidence (of the trustor on the ability and intention of the trustee), and predictability (of the trustee in the eyes of the trustor). The brief discussion presented below reflects on insights gained from such attempts at distinguishing trust from other similar notions (e.g. Cook et al., 2009; Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Jalava, 2006; Leveille, 2006; Mayer et al., 1995).

Trust is seen to differ from confidence¹² as trusting require recognising and assuming some perceived risk while the existence of confidence is not considered to explicitly encompass the same elements. This distinction is further exemplified in the study conducted by Jalava (2006) on the Luhmannian conception of trust, who also attempted to further clarify the blurred boundary by pointing out that trust rests on assuming risks where there is some degree of familiarity or previous engagement with the actor to be trusted, while confidence considers ‘inherent danger’ which may or may not develop into risk. Jalava’s distinction appears to base its argument on the assumption that risk and ‘inherent danger’ are different: stating that inherent danger may exist independent of the decision to trust a specific actor, whereas risk comes into existence when the trustor takes the decision to trust the other actor whom it is familiar with.

Equating trust with mere reliance would constitute a misunderstanding of the true meaning of the concept. It is argued that trust goes beyond reliance on others, and reliance may exist without trust (Hawley, 2014). Such mere reliance, for instance on individuals and inanimate objects, does not fully account for trust, despite the ordinary use of the term often confuses the two. It is argued that mere reliance and reliability lack rich normative assessment unlike trust.

Although predictability and trust are seen to be linked to each other to some extent, Mayer et al. (1995) argue that predictability of one actor’s intentions and actions does not necessarily lead the other actor to take risks in its relationship with that actor. Predictability, as in the case of cooperation and confidence, are viewed as insufficient to lead one actor to explicitly recognise and assume some perceived risk in its relationship with another actor.

Cooperation may exist between actors that may or may not trust each other, and it may be a product of voluntary or involuntary circumstances. Cooperation is not seen as a sufficient factor for the development of trust, as it lacks the element of perceived risk in a given relationship between actors.

As discussed above, the predictability of the intentions and actions of an actor, cooperation between actors, mere reliance on others, confidence of an actor on the intentions, ability and actions of another actor are not considered to be sufficient conditions for trust to exist between the actors. Trust is significantly different, at least does not have identical meaning, with concepts such as faith, satisfaction and confidence although they are often interchangeably used with trust (Leveille, 2006).

¹² The authors extended the attempts by Luhmann (1988) in drawing relative distinction between trust and confidence.

There is a complex relationship between trust and cooperation. Although trust can promote the development of cooperation between actors, it is however important to note that cooperation can be achieved through other means (Cook et al., 2009; Hardin, 2002). The existence of trust is not a sufficient factor for cooperation. In fact, trust may not at all be necessary for forging robust cooperation between actors. This may be connected to the distinction between the cognitive and behavioural aspects of trust. The behavioural displays that correspond with the interests of another actor in a relationship can be considered as evidence that confirm the existence of trust in a cognitive form. The behaviour emanating from trust is however not itself the trust. Nor is trust necessarily followed by behaviour (Hardin, 2002), this is partly because behaviour is not always influenced by trust, albeit the effect may be present in most cases. Cross-cultural empirical studies show that assuming trust and trustworthiness as essential prerequisites for cooperation to thrive may widely vary across specific contexts and social settings (Cook et al., 2009). This suggests an unconventional but intertwined relationship between trust and cooperation.

2.3 Trust and distrust: A complex interplay

The trend in the literature suggests that trust receives more direct attention whereas distrust rarely becomes the primary subject of conceptual, theoretical and empirical discussion. It seems that the scholarly discussion on distrust has remained to be an extension of discussion on trust rather than an independent quest. It is however recognised that a systematic understanding of trust requires an understanding of what distrust is (Hawley, 2014). The knowledge of what constitutes distrust can contribute to a better understanding of the components and outcomes of trust, and how trust can be built between actors in a given context. Any discussion on trust cannot be complete without at least basic reflections on distrust. It is difficult, if not impossible, to completely avoid at least partially addressing or inferring about distrust while making conceptual, theoretical and empirical analysis of trust. Consciously or otherwise, our understanding of trust informs our perception of distrust and vice versa. An account of one is expected to furnish an account of another. This can help in distinguishing between respective scenarios where trust, distrust or neither of the two become appropriate.

What is interesting is to see the degree of variation when it comes to understanding how the concepts of trust and distrust relate to each other. Trust and

distrust have complex conceptual relationship¹³. The range of views found in the literature include the notion of trust and distrust as separate and opposite constructs, on one hand, and as separate but systematically linked constructs that coexist, on the other. The tendency to view trust and distrust as constructs that are opposite to each other and as signifying extreme ends of a continuum seems to be prevalent in literature (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017; Saunders et al., 2014; Sztompka, 1999)¹⁴. It is not uncommon to encounter notions that tend to see distrust merely as an absence of trust. Some may perceive trust and distrust as distinct constructs (Huang & Dastmalchian, 2006; Van De Walle & Six, 2014). For instance, Zucker (1986) claims, in his economic and sociological analysis, that ‘trust can be disrupted without producing distrust’, unless the disruption of trust by the trustee is followed by a suspicion, on the part of the trustor, that the disruption is likely to continue and spread to other aspects of the interaction. Even more, Kutsyuruba and Walker (2017, p. 137) draw distinction between distrust and mistrust. They claimed that distrust is an unwillingness to trust others grounded on one’s knowledge and belief about another’s perceived trustworthiness and absence of trust developed as a response to a previous or anticipated violation of commitments, whereas mistrust is seen as suspicion or ‘a general sense of unease’ about the trustworthiness of others, questioning of an established trust, and as a trust that is misplaced. Such perspectives suggest that both distrust and mistrust imply a lack of trust.

Some consider trust and distrust as more than opposite constructs. For instance, Luhmann (1979, p. 71) claims that ‘[d]istrust, however, is not just the opposite of trust; as such, it is also a functional equivalent for trust’. Alternatively, others see trust and distrust as independent but linked dimensions (Kujala et al., 2016; Lewicki et al., 1998; Saunders et al., 2014; Saunders & Thornhill, 2004), rather than viewing the two as opposite extremes. Such arguments seem to suggest that trust and distrust may not be necessarily opposite to each other, and that a decline in trust may not necessarily constitute a rise in distrust, or vice versa. Thus, distrust may not be equivalent to an absence of trust. Others also go beyond this and claim that in certain circumstances, distrust may serve to increase trust between actors (e.g. Gamson, 1968; Kujala et al., 2016). Such arguments identify that trust and distrust can be complementary to each other. This suggests that two concepts can coexist within a specific context of relationship.

¹³ One issue that makes the task of studying trust challenging can be the perplexing nature of the conceptual relations that it has with distrust (Hardin, 2002).

¹⁴ This dissertation considers distrust as an opposite or absence of trust, unwillingness to trust, or suspicion and negative expectations about the trustworthiness of others.

Even more, distrust have been considered as a component of trust, however, as its negative version. Such notions underscore the asymmetry between the two constructs and posit that they function in contrary to each other, both in terms of their grounds and implications (Hardin, 2002, p. 90-93). The differences in terms of grounds is seen in the contrary motivations and incentives guiding trust and distrust. This is partly rooted in the asymmetry of gains and loss which provide the ground for one's trust and distrust in a given context. An actor trusts another when the perceived benefits of trusting and cooperating in the long run is assumed to be greater than its potential costs, whereas distrusts when the perceived loss from an initial trust and cooperation with the other actor exceeds the potential gains that might be obtained from future repeated interactions. The motivations for trusting and distrusting hence could be seen as contrary to each other.

Moreover, Hardin (2002) also points to some epistemological differences between the trust and distrust. It may be possible to dissect these epistemological differences into three components from a more analytical point of view. These could be mainly the extent to which one's interests are encapsulated within the interests of another, the degree to which these encapsulated interests are in conflict with the self-interests of the other, and the extent to which the other may fulfil or disregard these conflicting encapsulated interests. In such cases, an actor trusts the other when convinced that the other actor will care for the interests entrusted with it even though they may be conflicting to the self-interest of the other actor. On the contrary, what leads one actor to distrust another can be a consideration that the other actor may tend to disregard or act contrary to one's expectations and interests placed on that actor. These assessments may determine one's consideration to trust or distrust another in a given context. The epistemological differences also suggest that building trust takes greater length of time, better understanding of other's intentions, reiterated interactions, and considerable efforts, unlike distrust which could be a product of isolated behaviour taking place momentarily (Hardin, 2002). The literature seems to consistently suppose that trust develops gradually over an extended period of time through repeated interactions and rigorous efforts while it may take only a short period of time and minor instances for an actor to destroy and compromise an already established trust, or develop distrust against another (Bergan, 2012; Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999; McKnight et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986). The asymmetry in temporal orientation hence provides another key perspective to examine the link between trust and distrust.

Additionally, trust and distrust seem to have asymmetries in their implications to society (Hardin, 2002). There is perceived difference on the extent to which trust

and distrust may be inherently productive or harmful. Trust is seen to contribute to the cultivation of optimistic behaviour and cooperative values in society and enable actors to benefit from cooperation and ongoing relationships. Distrust, on the other hand, is perceived to reinforce pessimistic and uncooperative behaviour, erode positive intentions of social life, discourage actors from risk-taking tendencies, and therefore hinder opportunities of engaging in gainful interactions with others. The other aspect of asymmetries in the effects of trust and distrust could be seen in how they impact the cultivation of specific types of expectations and shape future ongoing relationships (Hardin, 2002). Those with positive initial experiences in trusting and cooperating with others tend to develop optimistic expectations and reinforce such tendencies even though they may later encounter negative experiences. However, actors with negative initial experiences in trust and cooperation tend to develop pessimistic expectations about the trustworthiness of others and may refrain from readily cooperating with others, and hence may be discouraged from grasping opportunities which, if taken, could help revise their intentions while encountering cooperative environments. In such cases, initial trust and distrust may have contrary effects on future intentions and developments of ongoing relationships. Trust tends to beget more trust and cooperation while distrust fosters more suspicious intentions and uncooperative behaviour. Trust tends to be associated with optimistic expectations while distrust with pessimistic expectations (Hardin, 2002; Kujala et al., 2016). It is also possible to argue that optimistic expectations tend to be seen as compatible with the characterisation of high trust and low distrust levels whereas pessimistic expectations with low trust and high distrust levels. On balance, it is important to understand that both trust and distrust may involve varying degrees of potential gains and loss. The difference seems to lie on whether the potential gains or loss outweigh the other in a given context.

In some cases, literature points to critical views towards widely held notions which perceive trust as essentially moral and distrust as harmful (Hardin, 2002; Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017). Trust often tends to be viewed positively, and its presence assumed to contribute to healthy social life, whereas distrust tends to be conceptualised in a negative light. However, trust is susceptible to violation, misuse and misplacement (Hawley, 2014; Kramer, 1999; Spier, 2013), can produce risk and loss (Bachmann, 2001; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015) and inefficiencies (Mishra, 1996; Zucker, 1986). Despite the widely held notion that high trust facilitates the development of productive and robust working relationships, it is also claimed that it may to some extent lead to the formulation of 'false organisational unity' (Kujala et al., 2016, p. 701). In fact, the outcomes of trust may not always be moral since

one's commitment to remain trustworthy towards another may not be necessarily based on the assessment that a given expectation placed on it is a moral one (Hardin, 2002). For example, actors may trust and cooperate with each other to commit crimes or engage in dysfunctional behaviour.

Moreover, distrust is not entirely and inherently harmful. In fact, distrust that is founded on evidence and justified through rational assessments of knowledge and belief about a trustee's degree of trustworthiness may protect a trustor against potentially dangerous and harmful dealings (Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999). Distrust may enable one to be cautious and refrain from misplacing trust and assuming unnecessary risks, as misplaced trust may be potentially dangerous (Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Kramer, 1999). The presence of some degree of distrust can also be seen as an aspect of a healthy organisational functioning (Bess & Dee, 2008; Gamson, 1968). Trust may also emerge as a reaction to distrust (Hardin, 2002). This can be illustrated by instances where some groups or communities tend to develop strong internal bonds, trust and closer cooperation to protect themselves from a system of government whom they distrust or see as an external source of threat. The theoretical analysis in the field of sociology, such as the structural functionalism perspective (Ritzer, 2011) and the classical Emile Durkheim's theorisation, also reiterate that social problems, including economic depression or war, apart from their largely dysfunctional consequences, may promote social cohesion. Such reinforced solidarity may enable people to pull efforts to defend against a common threat and generally initiate social changes. Moreover, further expanding the complex interplay between trust and distrust, some argue that both could be unwanted under certain circumstances (e.g. Hawley, 2014).

Trust and distrust may share some aspects. First, the notion of commitment can show the link between trust and distrust (Hawley, 2014). At the core of this argument seems to be the claim that trust and distrust cannot be fully understood without considering the perceived commitment of whom we trust to fulfil a given expectation. Such commitment accounts of trust and distrust place emphasis on questioning whether the other actor has commitment to a given expectation or action and whether that actor can be relied on to fulfil the commitment. Hence, relying on a consideration of motive-based explanations can make understanding of trust and distrust incomplete. Trust and distrust hence need to comprise a consideration of others' competence and willingness or commitment. Trust represents a fulfilled commitment while distrust is characterised by an unfulfilled commitment (Hawley, 2014). The literature also shows the emergence of distrust is associated with a disruption of expectation and a subsequent suspicion that such

disruption in one instance is likely to lead to a disruption of expectations in other interactions (Zucker, 1986). In such cases, it seems that distrust could be facilitated more by an 'attribution of intentionality' that a single disruption of expectation may continue throughout an entire interaction. Suspicion, hence, becomes a cognitive aspect of distrust (Kramer, 1999). Second, distrust is not identical with non-reliance, in the same way as trust is not equivalent to mere reliance on others to do something (Hawley, 2014). The distinction can be seen in the differences between how one reacts when its trust is disregarded and where its reliance on others is dishonoured (p. 3). It is posited that disregard to one's trust tends to be met with normative sentiments of betrayal whereas ignorance to a given reliance may only be reacted with disappointment (Hawley, 2014, p. 3). A breach of trust may provoke a reaction of confusion, shock, anger, anxiety and embarrassment (Mishra, 1996; Zucker, 1986). Understanding such differences in reactions is claimed to help in distinguishing between sheer reliance and trust.

Third, as the notion of vulnerability and uncertainty is at the centre of understanding trust, its relevance also extends to analysing why actors may tend to distrust others. In further examining this issue, Hardin (2002) claims that actors may have tendencies to distrust others due to four inherent and major uncertainties involved in relationships. These include the possibilities that issues under question and behaviours of actors may become inconsistent over time, risks that some actors may strategically misrepresent themselves without mischievous intentions in an effort to become advantageous and present themselves more appealing, uncertainties associated with changing circumstances which may end interactions or threaten to end them or possibly change the stakes underlying interactions or fundamentally change what is at stake in the relationships, and possibilities that actors may reasonably cover and conceal their true intentions (p. 93-95). These uncertainties and problems may often negatively affect subjective judgements while evaluating the degree to which others are trustworthy.

Four, in the same way as one actor trusts another when there are perceived adequate grounds for establishing trust on a given matter, one may distrust another due to the fact that the degree of the perceived trustworthiness of the other actor has deficiency. Hence, distrust is not unfounded, rather, it is seen as grounded on one's knowledge and belief about another's perceived trustworthiness (Hardin, 2002). It seems that Hardin sees distrust, in the same fashion as trust, as a three-part relation, that is in terms of who distrusts whom over which matter. Such approaches of understanding distrust establish that an actor may not distrust all. Instead, an actor may only distrust a specific actor over a specific matter. This further implies that an

actor that is distrusted by another actor in relation to a given issue could be trusted by others on the same issue, or by that same actor in relation to another matter. This entails the context-dependent nature of distrust (Kujala et al., 2016). The relevance of context is undeniable for understanding trust and distrust.

2.4 Characteristics of trust

The concept of trust incorporates various characteristics, since the nature of trust in most cases significantly depends on the specific context within which a given relationship takes place between actors. Understanding these characteristics contributes to a richer analysis and application of the concept of trust in any context.

In their analysis of previous studies on trust, Li et al. (2012, p. 88) summarise the key characteristics of trust, indicating that trust can be *subjective, bi-directional, asymmetric, non-transitive, context-dependence, and dynamic*. Trust can be seen as subjective since its establishment mainly depends on one's perceived trustworthiness of another actor, which varies from an actor to another and that different actors may not have similar tendencies of trustworthiness towards others. Since trust only has meaning in a context of relationship between two or more actors, trust may also be perceived as bi-directional, where actors involved in the relationship have trust, on one or more matters. The reason for which one actor trusts another, over a given matter, may not be necessarily the same reason for the other actor. Interestingly, trust may embody an asymmetrical nature, where a trustor trusting the trustee may not necessarily imply the trustee trusting back the trustor. Even more, in relationships involving more than two actors, trust can be non-transitive in nature, where for instance, *A* trusts *B*, and *B* trusts *C*, may not necessarily imply an existence of trust between *A* and *C*. However, this is not to dismiss the possibility of a transference process through which one actor may transfer some degree of trust to an unknown actor from a trusted actor who has already developed trust with the unknown actor. The trustee in this case may serve as an intermediary between two unknown actors which have no ongoing exchange between them, and each actor lacks prior information about the other. As reiterated throughout this chapter, trust is context-dependent in nature, such that the trust established between actors is inseparable from the context, who the actors are, the nature of the relationship they have, and the issue over which trust required. This suggests that nature of trust and grounds of establishing trustworthiness varies from one context to another and across actors. The inextricable link trust has with specific contexts logically suggests

that trust may also be dynamic, in the sense that its nature and factors that help establish and maintain it may significantly change over time between actors. Other researchers, such as Kujala et al. (2016), also stress the dynamic nature of trust.

The literature also reiterates the arduous but fragile nature of trust (Bergan, 2012; Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017; McKnight et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986). It is noted that the process of building trust can be long, slow and challenging, but once trust is built, it could also be destroyed in a short period of time (Baier, 1986; Kramer, 1999; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). The process of building trust can be considerably challenging than maintaining an already existing trust (Baier, 1986). Interestingly, as much as building trust requires repeated interaction and familiarity between actors over a considerably long period of time, it is also argued that it could be destroyed or lost in a 'single interaction' (Vidovich & Currie, 2011) and 'matter of minutes' (Began, 2012). Distrust may take significantly shorter time to arise than trust in a given relationship (Harid, 2002).

There can be various accounts that explain how trust is maintained between actors once a trust is established. The theorisation by Hardin (2002, p. 145-150) posits that trust and cooperation between actors considerably depend on two main factors that draw on the functional aspects of trust. The first factor is the value the actors attach to the relationship they have and trust between them. This mutual recognition of the benefits of the reciprocal interaction serves as a source of incentive and commitment for the continuation of the relationship. The other explanation is that trust is maintained through the support of feedback mechanisms that enable actors to continuously assess each other's intentions and behaviour, consistency between words and action, and dependability in the future. These explanations tend to approach the maintenance of trust from the perspective of actors driven by incentives to transform casual encounters into potentially functional and beneficial ongoing relationships in the future. Additionally, literature indicates that trust can be maintained, on one hand, with the support of control and incentive instruments that regulate behaviour and deter violations of commitments, and on the other, through the development of shared values, norms and patterns of procedures (Bachmann, 2001; Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Hardin, 2002; Stensaker & Gronitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Sztompka, 1999; Zucker, 1986)¹⁵.

¹⁵ Such perspectives on trust building broadly relate to rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive mechanisms. A detailed discussion of these perspectives can be found in Chapter Five, section 5.3.

2.5 Antecedents of trust

The antecedents of trust are understood as the dispositions and grounds that lead to the formation of trust between actors (Li et al., 2012). Antecedents explain on what basis actors establish trust on others, for instance, knowledge one actor has about another, existence of contracts or other external constraints to ensure that the trustee will fulfil expectations, accessibility and sharing of information about the intentions, ability, and integrity of the other actor. Trust can be a product of different antecedents depending on contexts. Each antecedent may determine the nature and level of trust that one actor places over the other.

Several existing studies identify various types of antecedents of trust. The literature review conducted by Li et al. (2012) argues that these antecedents can be broadly categorised into six, namely, dispositional, cognition-based, institutional, knowledge-based, calculative, and identification-based trust antecedents (p. 89-91). Although these studies emerge from the field of marketing and business studies, with a specific focus on the theme of online transaction, the well-established body of theoretical and empirical knowledge on the concept of trust is expected to offer useful insights into the understanding of trust in higher education research. The *dispositional trust antecedents* reflect the general propensity and willingness that an actor has to trust others in a given relationship taking place within a specific context. The *cognition-based trust antecedents* indicate the trust that one forms over others based on the cognitive ability to rapidly process the information gained about another, such as on personal characteristics, psychological qualities and socially formed and culturally shaped behavioural features, on first impressions, in the absence of an experience of ongoing interactions with that given actor. The category of *institution-based trust antecedents* refers to the trust actors develop over others as a result of reliance on rules and other external impersonal socio-economic structures that motivate, sanction and regulate certain behaviour in specific contexts. The *knowledge-based trust* antecedents indicate the tendency to trust on the basis of familiarity between actors, that is, emanating from the information one has about another's past behaviour and on the extent of a perceived predictability and consistency of future behaviour. The *calculative trust antecedents* suggest the formation of trust on the basis of the calculation that an actor makes about the benefits and risks involved in trusting and cooperating with another actor, where balancing between the two is expected to lead to a reward that exceeds a potential loss. Last, *identification-based trust antecedents* indicate trust on the grounds that one actor identifies itself with the intentions, goals, and value of another in the course of repeated interactions.

However, it is important to note that these processes may not be mutually exclusive to each other. A given relationship may embody more than one of these processes. The characterisation of trust in relation to these processes may depend on the actors involved, nature of the relationship at hand, and specific aspects of each context. In addition to the antecedents discussed above, Kramer (1999, p. 575-581) also identifies six major bases of trust such as dispositional, history-based, third parties as conduits of trust, category-based, role-based and rule-based trust. These bases are seen as antecedent conditions that serve to promote the development of trust.

When considering these trust antecedents as sequential stages involved in the process of trust building, identification-based trust is seen as the highest level of trust since it is founded on a sense of mutual concern, commonality of goals and well-established mutual understanding, whereas calculative trust may signify lower stages of trust formation, and knowledge-based trust reflects a medium level development of trust (Kuo & Yu, 2009, p. 824; Li et al., 2012, p. 91). These stages of trust are seen to develop sequentially through the course of repeated interactions between actors, thereby the antecedents that becomes a major component of emphasis changes as the depth and strength of an ongoing interaction increases. The different categories of trust antecedents are, however, not mutually exclusive, and therefore, the same relationship between actors may incorporate the characteristic of more than one trust antecedents.

The establishment of trust between actors may involve various interrelated processes through which an actor establishes the trustworthiness of the other actor. According to the analysis of Leimeister et al. (2005), these processes can be calculative, prediction, intentional, and transference. The process in which one actor decides to trust may involve calculating the benefits and risks of trusting the other actor, assessing whether the behaviour of the other actor is predictable and consistent, rationally assessing the extent to which the other actor has the required competence and ability to fulfil its expectation, evaluating the perceived intentions of the other actor, and assessing whether the trust in an actor with whom trust has been established could be transferred to another actor that is not known (p. 103). Relationship networks play a key role in making the transference of trust possible. The rational calculations involved in assessing trustworthiness can be found across several literature (Bachmann, 2001; De Boer, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Li et al., 2012; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Sztompka, 1999; Zucker, 1986).

Moreover, a perceived trustworthiness can be understood in terms the interrelationship between key factors and characteristics of the trustee such as ability,

benevolence and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995). Trust could also be explained in terms of two trust-supporting components and enabling functionalities, such that establishing and sustaining trust between a trustor and trustee is mainly achieved based on the perceived competence and goodwill of the trustee (Leimeister et al., 2005).

2.6 Conclusion

The shortage of well-developed conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature on the concept of trust in the field of higher education compels researchers to rely on the repertoire of knowledge developed in other disciplines and adopting conceptualisations deemed suitable for analysing trust issues in relation to various themes in higher education.

Exploring the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions in relation to quality and quality assurance must take into account the multidimensional and context-dependent nature of trust. Despite lack of consensus in conceptualisation, recurring themes across available definitions of trust such as relationship and interdependence between actors, presence of uncertainty and willingness to assume perceived risk can provide the basis for identifying relevant set of conceptual dimensions to empirically explore trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions. Such dimensions of trust may broadly encompass assessing the concern (intention), capacity and openness of institutions and the perceived risks institutions pose to quality. In fact, risk constitutes a distinctive and unavoidable component of trust. The assessment of perceived risk merits due emphasis if an empirical investigation of trust is to meaningfully capture the core of its essence. However, the overall contested and elusive nature of the concept can pose complex challenges in empirically examining trust despite employing a set of relevant conceptual dimensions.

The complex interplay between trust and distrust reminds researchers of the value of perceiving these concepts as interconnected and, at times, complementary constructs rather than limited to notions which consider the two to be detached and opposite. The present study however limits its investigation to trust to avoid the complexity which can arise from integrating an analysis of distrust.

The study understands that, in general terms, the decision to trust and therefore willingly assume perceived risk could be explained along the continuum between the view of trust as a product of rational and calculative thinking or a development of

shared norms, values, expectations and identity. These views inform the theoretical and analytical framework which guide the empirical investigation into what possible implications the overall level of trust that a quality assurance agency has on higher education institutions may bear for the nature of quality management models. Reliance on formal control and incentive mechanisms or dependence on shared values and norms may provide contrasting features of accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models.

3 EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE: A CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

The objective of this chapter is to present a conceptual overview of quality and quality assurance, including the prominent approaches of external quality evaluations carried out by quality assurance agencies and the internal quality assessment conducted at higher education institutions. This serves to illustrate quality and quality assurance as the central concepts in relation to which trust is theoretically and empirically investigated. Studying the trust between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies and its implications for the nature of quality management models, thus, could not be viable without first establishing an understanding of such central concepts. The chapter also provides the foundation for the formulation of the components of the theoretical and analytical framework, which are presented in Chapter Five.

This chapter begins by reflecting on the contested nature of quality. It then sheds light on the thrust and rationale behind the growing concerns for quality and the subsequent emergence and evolution of quality assurance practices in higher education is presented. This section explains why the introduction of quality assurance in higher education was necessary and what purposes it has served since. The chapter also gives an overview of quality assurance in African higher education.

Another focus of this chapter is to discuss the nature of quality assurance systems. It delves into the essence of the external and internal quality assurance approaches. The chapter places emphasis on exploring the link between the external quality evaluations carried out by quality assurance agencies and the internal quality assessment conducted at higher education institutions. This analysis addresses the relationship between the concepts of quality assurance and quality enhancement and the tensions between accountability and the improvement purposes of quality monitoring in higher education. Last, the chapter concludes by highlighting the relevance of its key points of discussion to the research questions of this study.

3.1 Quality: A contested nature

Quality emerged as the centre of attention in higher education in the 1980s. Although the concept of quality has long been present in academia, a more explicit emphasis on assuring and enhancing quality began in this period (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The concept migrated to higher education and other public service sectors from industries and service sectors (Neave, 1994; Newton, 2002). Quality was then mainly seen from a traditional perspective, which relates mainly to excellence, exclusivity and elitism (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Elassy, 2015; Green, 1994; Harvey, 2007; Tam, 2001). Quality assurance in higher education also remained an implicit activity (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). However, the effort to properly define, operationalise, measure and customise the concept of quality gained more momentum in the 1990s. The literature also indicates an increased amount of attention given during this period to conducting research into performance indicators and statistical indicators as means of operationalising quality (Harvey, 2002; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Some of the prominent works of this nature include those of Adams (1993), Cheng and Tam (1997), Green (1994) and Harvey and Green (1993). The essence of quality in this period focused on the need for regulatory mechanisms and ensuring accountability (Cheng, 2003; Elassy, 2015). Quality was mainly associated with conformity, bureaucratisation and even being a burden (Newton, 2002). The meanings attached to and approaches used to deal with quality have considerably developed and transformed with the turn of the millennium.

The literature on the topic of quality in higher education indicates the complex and elusive nature of the concept. The difficulty of defining the concept can be reflected by, for instance, the famous question posed by Ball (1985)—‘What the hell is quality?’¹⁶—and the conclusion of Vroeijenstijn (1995) that striving to determine a definition for quality and discussions on performance indicators is a waste of time. Vroeijenstijn (1995) suggests that instead stakeholders should clarify what their requirements are for assessing quality.

There is a lack of consensus regarding what quality means and which mechanisms would best assure its existence and enhance its development. Quality could mean different things to different people who hold different views about higher education. It is common for key stakeholders in higher education such as students, graduates, academics, non-academic staff, management of higher education institutions, employers, government, funding agencies, quality assurance agencies, taxpayers and

¹⁶ The question was first posed by Pirsig (1974) in his rather philosophical discussion on the meaning of quality.

the public, to have conflicting interpretations of what the concept of quality constitutes (e.g. Udam & Heidmets, 2013; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Schindler et al. (2015) further questioned whether formulating a universally acceptable definition is feasible and whether terms, such as quality and quality assurance are applicable across cultures. This underscores the relative nature of the concept (Elassy, 2015; Green, 1994; Harvey & Green, 1993; Lemaitre, 2002) and its dynamic characteristics (Boyle & Bowden, 1997). Moreover, the understanding of quality depends on the specific context, underlying perspectives and the purpose it is expected to serve.

Another challenge with defining quality pertains to the multi-dimensional nature of the concept (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey, 2002; Vlasceanu et al., 2007). In this sense, quality is seen as a product of a complex interplay of several factors that, for instance, pertain to the input, process and output of higher education. No single factor can define quality comprehensively.

Despite these challenges, conceptualising quality is essential to assuring and enhancing it. This underscores the implications that defining quality has for practices in quality assurance. As such, some scholars attempted to develop definitions of quality for research and practice in the field of higher education. Perhaps the most widely referred work is that of Harvey and Green (1993), which provided the conceptions of quality as excellence, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. Another prominent but largely similar approach to defining quality was provided by Green (1994), which defines quality as the conformance to standards, fitness for purpose, effectiveness in achieving institutional goals, meeting customers' needs and the traditional concept of quality.

After carefully reviewing the literature, Schindler et al. (2015) summarise the existing multiple definitions of quality into four broad categories of conceptions, namely purposeful, exceptional, transformative and accountable. These categories, to a considerable extent, resemble those conceptions suggested by Harvey and Green (1993) and Green (1994). Another work by Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) suggests a set of six dimensions for assessing quality in higher education: tangibles, competence, attitude, content, delivery and reliability. The dimensions have an explicit stakeholder-based and customer-oriented nature. The models presented by Adams (1993) and Cheng and Tam (1997) are additional examples of the conceptualisations of quality developed in relation to a higher education setting. Contrary to the prevalent theoretical and abstract notions of quality, Gibbs (2010) takes a more detailed and practical approach to organising the dimensions of quality into specific sets of presage, process and output variables or indicators to be applied in higher education.

Other notable conceptualisations include viewing quality from the perspective of power and politics (leading to the colonisation of universities by foreign ideology which emphasise a globalised economy) (Lemaitre, 2002), viewing the quality agenda as an arena of pressure group politics (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008), viewing knowledge, power and meanings as continuously shaping the perspectives on quality (Houston & Paewai, 2013) and the need of incorporating moral values and ethics in understanding the meaning of quality (Prisacariu & Shah, 2016)¹⁷.

It would be logical to conclude, from the above discussion, that the concept of quality requires greater conceptual clarity, and more research and discussion is needed in this regard. A conceptual model that carefully considers the competing perspectives of stakeholders also becomes important.

Moreover, the literature on quality in higher education interchangeably uses terms such as quality control, quality assessment, quality review, quality assurance, quality audit, accreditation, quality management and quality enhancement. An additional concept of quality work has also been proposed in order to give more emphasis to analysing the actual practices implemented and processes adopted in the quality maintenance and enhancement efforts of higher education institutions (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). Further, there seems to be inadequate discernible differences between the conceptualisations of quality management and quality assurance (e.g. Harvey, 2004-17; Tam, 2001; Vlasceanu et al., 2007). The boundary between the two is increasingly becoming blurred, as both are seen to encompass broad sets of procedures, mechanisms and processes that are employed to assess, monitor and improve quality at system, institution and programme levels. However, the apparent fragmentation and inconsistent use of these terminologies creates confusion and constrains researchers from making a rationally determined and contextually-bounded selection of terms¹⁸.

3.2 The thrust and rationale for formal quality assurance

The review of the literature suggests that several factors explain the thrust and rationale behind the growing concern for quality and the subsequent emergence and

¹⁷ The authors state the need for a new definition of quality that takes into account moral values and ethics in higher education. This appears to be a reaction to the growing erosion of ethical practices and standards in higher education, which, according to the authors, arises from the pressures created by massification and marketisation.

¹⁸ It should be clear that this study is not free from interchangeably using such terms without intentionally appealing to the distinctive processes and methodological peculiarities each may imply.

evolution of quality assurance practices in higher education. Most of these drivers are strongly associated with the uncertainties and tensions rooted in the major challenges being faced and the ongoing transformations within higher education around the globe. The specific push for the initiation of quality assurance, the exact purposes it serves, and the features it incorporates vary across countries and higher education systems. Some of the factors that prompted the introduction of quality assurance are discussed below.

Being a key factor in the process, the massification of higher education intensified the need to assure quality (Singh, 2010; Van Damme, 2000, 2002; Vroeijsstijn, 1995). Extending access to the masses rather than just an elite segment of population brought about complex challenges for higher education institutions and the manner in which they organise their teaching and learning. This exacerbated the concerns regarding quality in education (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). Besides increasing the number of students in classes, which strained the quality of education, massification also led to diversification in the type of higher education institutions and study programmes. This required more rigorous procedures to ensure that the education provided meets certain threshold standards and was not compromised in pursuit of profit. Lemaitre (2002) also notes a horizontal and vertical differentiation taking place in higher education, characterised by the proliferation of private higher education institutions and the functioning of universities and non-university institutions simultaneously. On the other side of this diversification, the student population began to comprise a significant proportion of adult learners and those coming to higher education from working life, which required the reconsideration of the organisation of teaching and learning. The growing understanding of the economic benefits of higher education by students and employers contributed to increasing the enrolment of individuals from non-traditional age groups seeking to upgrade or earn new qualifications. Moreover, this expansion of access meant decreasing public funding and the amount of resources spent per student. Massification aggravated the problems with efficiently utilising the available resources, which are connected to, for instance, the duplication of programmes and underutilisation of facilities. Massification, in general, induced more attention around the costs and benefits of higher education (Vroeijsstijn, 1995). Another issue that prompted the formation of more direct quality assurance practices was, given the growing enrolment size, the need to improve the performance of higher education institutions in terms of student progression and retention (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002).

The massification process was supported by continuous developments in new modes of delivery, such as distance and online learning, which required rigorous procedures to ensure the integrity of such platforms of learning, standard of education and accountability of the institutions providing the programmes (Van Damme, 2000). The traditional teaching and learning methods began to be increasingly supported and revolutionised by innovations in Information and Communications Technology (ICT). As much as harnessing these opportunities enhanced the capacity of higher education institutions to serve customers, the challenges such developments posed for academic management needed to be regulated through quality assurance. A growing expectation with regard to addressing the interests and demands of students also became a concern with such transformations.

Another driving force for introducing quality assurance in higher education was the growing demand for ensuring the accountability of higher education institutions in exchange for deregulation and the granting of autonomy regarding academic, finance, managerial, staffing and other such crucial aspects of institutional functioning (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Frazer, 1997; Vroeijsstijn, 1995). It was no longer efficient approach for states to centrally administer strict control over higher education, since the proliferation of higher education institutions made such arrangements increasingly complex. In addition, the rapid continuous changes in technological and scientific knowledge demanded an increasingly flexible and decentralised regulation. This meant weaker state control and more autonomy for self-regulation and self-determination at higher education institutions. Such fundamental changes in the relationship between governments and higher education institutions led to the devolution of authority and an increase in institutional autonomy. This was systematically tied to a more direct emphasis, on the part of the state, on the output evaluation and performance-based steering of higher education institutions (Van Damme, 2000). In the context of such 'evaluative states', Neave (1998) argues that a decrease in state control entailed a counter increase in state surveillance of higher education institutions. There was a growing need for higher education institutions to reassure stakeholders that the resources provided to them were being spent properly. Thus, this would legitimatise public funding by providing evidence of their efficiency and effectiveness and of the fact that the educational services they provide to stakeholders are of good value when considering the funds they receive (Van Damme, 2000, 2002). The introduction of external quality assurance mechanisms in higher education can be explained by the need to hold higher education institutions accountable to stakeholders and to assist governments

with making decisions related to the allocation of funding and with overall policy-making (Frazer, 1997). Quality assurance systems comprise various procedures, processes and mechanisms that are instrumental in generating the information essential for evaluating the performance and accountability of higher education institutions.

On the other hand, the changing landscape of relationship between governments and higher education institutions is argued to have resulted in a 'quality gap', where the amount of funding provided by governments began to decrease in the face of rising expectations from higher education institutions to improve their efficiency of mission accomplishment (Barnett, 1992; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The reduction in public funding has compelled higher education institutions to diversify their funding sources, for instance, by charging tuition fees, conducting contract research, forging partnerships with industries, seeking private donation and pursuing other revenue generation activities (Lemaitre, 2002). While operating under such circumstances of fiscal crisis and budget restrictions, the necessity of demonstrating social accountability is growing in importance in higher education, and quality assurance plays a key role in ensuring and safeguarding societal interests.

Looking beyond national territories, the rise of globalisation made the quality of higher education an international and global concern rather than a national issue. The increasing interconnectedness and internationalisation of the higher education market required nations and their institutions to exert significant efforts towards ensuring the standards of education and increasing transparency in the provision of information in order to attract high-calibre students and academic staff, establish their credibility and institutional reputation, secure recognition of the qualifications they issue and become successful in trans-national education activities (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Van Damme, 2000, 2002; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). International mobility and exchange programmes, such as ERASMUS played an important role in raising the significance of such issues. Developments in international cooperation with regard to higher education required more insight into the quality of institutions and recognition of qualifications between higher education institutions and national higher education systems to facilitate the mobility of students and academic staff. It also prompted the need to demonstrate equivalent standards for the curricula, provision of education and graduates. Quality assurance is thus seen as a tool that serves these demands.

The duty of ensuring quality gained considerable importance due to the increasing competitiveness of the global higher education landscape and the proliferation of

private providers. The commercial competition and transnational trade¹⁹ in higher education services is on the rise (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Van Damme, 2002). Such developments required the considerable broadening of the information base of higher education, which would enable students to make informed decision about their studies, facilitate consumer choices and protect students from potential fraudulent and rogue providers (Singh, 2010). Quality assurance generates and disseminates such valuable information to international students and employers. The demand for greater transparency in higher education institutions and for informing stakeholders about the relevant standards played a key role in the emergence of national quality assurance systems (Frazer, 1997), for instance, for the advent of accreditation practices. Recently, ranking systems have begun serving the purpose of informing stakeholders about the relative quality of higher education institutions, although their methodology is often a subject of controversy. In general, advancements in international, transnational and cross-border education required the establishment of systematic mechanisms for assuring the quality of education and accountability of providers.

Drawing on the issue of trust, Van Damme (2000, 2002) also argues that national quality assurance systems were needed, as there was a growing concern that higher education would lose the confidence of the key stakeholders (such as government, employers, industries, students and society) with regard to the capacities of traditional academic quality management and the production of quality outputs at a level required by the increasingly competitive modern labour market and transformative economy²⁰. Similarly, government and higher education institutions began to become aware of the inadequacy of the traditional academic systems of quality assurance in the face of the increasing demands for tangible knowledge and skills for improving the social mobility of citizens. Thus, this necessitated a shift from such traditional practices that mainly operate based on informal norms and the autonomy of academics to more market-oriented practices that place trust on strong formal institutional quality controls (Dill, 2000; Enders, 2013; Van Damme, 2000, 2002; Weingart, 2013). These changes in the relationship that higher education has

¹⁹ Transnational trade in educational services is a part of the agreements that regulate international trade, such as the 'General Agreement on Trade in Services' (GATS) that was established in 1995. Some of the aspects covered by the agreement include the mobility of students, establishment of branch campuses, privatisation, corporate and for-profit institutions, institutions providing e-learning and a range of other diverse features of reality. This agreement that promoted the liberalisation of trade in education was met with anxiety and resistance from the international higher education community (Van Damme, 2002).

²⁰ A detailed discussion of the causes of the trust 'crisis' in higher education is presented in Chapter Four, section 4.4.

with the society and labour market brought explicit attention to the necessity of assessing the demands of study programmes and the employability of those graduating from them (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Yorke, 2000). The need to improve institutional performance with regard to meeting the expectations for enhancing the employability of graduates is another purpose that quality assurance systems are tasked with systematically supporting (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). As such, the motives behind initiating quality assurance in higher education incorporate, among other things, supporting the improvement of higher education institutions (Frazer, 1997).

More importantly, the interest towards ensuring the standards and quality of education, using mechanisms of quality assurance, relates to the broader role higher education is required to play for economic development and societal inclusion (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). It does this, for instance, by supporting equity and access, making education responsive to the needs of society, conducting problem-solving research, serving the interests of its customers and regaining the confidence of the public (Lemaitre, 2002). Quality assurance mechanisms were thus increasingly demanded for assessing whether the services provided by higher education institutions, such as education, research and societal engagement, met the minimum standards and whether they were in line with national interests. Such growing requirements of societies and governments for greater social accountability and quality assurance at higher education institutions facilitated the active discussion and efforts regarding quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

According to Harvey (1999), the three main rationales underlying quality assurance are ensuring accountability, assessing compliance with externally defined goals, roles and agendas and supporting the improvement of standards in inputs, processes and outputs at institutions. On the basis of the analysis of the drivers behind the emergence of quality assurance in higher education, the UNESCO report on quality assurance concludes that the purpose of the existing external quality assurance agencies is to mainly focus on enhancing quality, ensuring accountability, conducting accreditations and institutional and programme evaluations, providing information to stakeholders and conducting benchmarking (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). National quality assurance systems also serve to safeguard national interests in the face of the rapid transformations taking place in higher education and the associated external environment (Van Damme, 2002). It is important to remember that the exact scope and format of quality assurance considerably varies across countries, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. In an

interesting discussion, Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) identify the differences between the external quality assurance practices of Western Europe, on one hand, and those of Central and Eastern Europe on the other. The authors argue that external quality assurance in Western Europe tends to primarily focus on institutional and programme evaluation, whereas the main purpose of that in Central and Eastern Europe is accreditation. Another example can be the unique practice involving subject evaluation that has been used in the UK. However, a relatively common goal for an external quality evaluation is assessing the compliance of higher education institutions with the stated criteria and standards.

3.3 Quality assurance in African higher education

As far as African higher education is concerned, quality assurance is only a recent phenomenon that started taking root after the mid-2000s. Although the continent is home to some of the oldest higher education institutions in the world, higher education began expanding mainly after its independence from colonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, thereby accounting for its characterisation as a young higher education system. What followed was breakneck massification in both public and private higher education with the objective of building the human capital that was desperately required to sustain national economies after the European colonisers had left (Cloete et al., 2015). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, however, this expansion of access compounded the challenges related to funding, governance, quality of students and teaching staff, facilities and efficiency in resource utilisation, only to aggravate the concerns over the quality of education. Shabani et al. (2014) argue that the conditions were relatively worse in Francophone Africa than the Anglophone areas.

Owing to the pressure of the quality agenda spread by the developments and organisations of the developed world²¹ (such as the World Bank, OECD, Bologna Process and UNESCO) and catalysed by other continental developments within Africa, a number of countries in the continent now have made progress towards

²¹ Singh (2010) also includes the issue of quality assurance ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ when explaining the diffusion of quality assurance practices, implying that they mainly spread from developed countries to the developing ones. Similarly, Lemaitre (2002) also argues that it has been a common practice for developing countries to adopt the quality assurance models and standards that are used in developed countries. Moreover, this is often done without sufficiently contextualising, translating and redefining them to ensure compatibility with the circumstances of their practical realities. The quality evaluation models used in the US and UK are cited as those frameworks that are frequently copied mostly by other developing and, sometimes, developed countries (Van Damme, 2002).

developing national structures for monitoring the quality of education. According to the latest figures, about 35 African countries currently have functioning national quality assurance agencies (AfriQAN, 2018), and some countries are moving towards establishing such agencies. This suggests that more than 75 per cent of these agencies were established during the last 15 years. Since these quality assurance bodies are relatively young, a majority of them face severe shortages of trained personnel and limitations in capacity with regard to effectively implementing mandates (Shabani, 2013). The agencies also cooperate with each other and the associated organisations through the platforms of AfriQAN and other sub-regional networks²².

In their review, Shabani et al. (2014) identify several national, regional and continental initiatives taken in Africa to improve the quality of higher education. The national-level initiatives include the establishment of quality assurance agencies, harmonisation of higher education strategy and formation of the African Higher Education and Research Space. At the regional level, the authors emphasise the active roles played by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES). The authors also indicate that the UNESCO, Association of African Universities (AAU), African Union Commission (AUC)²³ and Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) are key organisations involved in the quality assurance initiatives at the continental level. The Arusha Convention and its adoptions regarding the recognition of qualifications promotes comparability and quality in higher education. In their comparative analysis of the regional higher education reform initiatives taking place in Africa with the Bologna Process of the European Union, Woldegiorgis et al. (2015) found that the African higher education harmonisation initiatives were largely externally driven, externally initiated, dependent on external funding and expert support and had a weak sense of the internal ownership of the processes. This, in combination with the inadequate political commitment, weak participation, communication and coordination among the parties involved, duplication and fragmentation in processes and complexities arising from the disparate academic structures that African countries inherited from the European

²² Some of these sub-regional networks include the East African Higher Education Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN), Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES).

²³ The initiatives that are being implemented by the African Union Commission are the African Higher Education Harmonisation Strategy, Tuning Africa and the African Quality Rating Mechanism (Shabani, 2013). Shabani et al. (2014) criticise the lack of effectiveness in terms of the implementation of the harmonisation strategies and consider this one of the challenges hindering the efforts for creating the African Higher Education and Research Space.

colonisers, resulted in a delayed and poor-quality implementation of the initiatives (p. 246).

It would be sensible to argue that a crucial motivation for establishing quality assurance procedures in African higher education seems to be the perceived need of the governments to regulate quality and ensure standards, particularly in private higher education institutions (MacGregor, 2009; Shabani, 2013). Similar tendencies of applying ‘strong filter’ and control using quality assurance have also been linked to the emergence of private institutions and new providers entering the field in Latin America and Eastern Europe (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011a, p. 246; Surssock, 2011, p. 116). Putting in place robust quality assurance systems at national, regional and continental levels is thus expected to contribute to the realisation of the African Higher Education and Research Space (MacGregor, 2009; Shabani et al., 2014).

3.4 Quality assurance systems

Despite the existence of numerous conceptualisations, quality assurance is understood, for the purpose of this study, as an aggregate of policies and legislative frameworks, organisational structures and processes, various types of procedures, approaches, practices, tools and systems, which may be internal and external to a higher education institution, primarily designed for the purpose of assuring, enhancing, monitoring or assessing the standards and quality of education, research, societal engagement, and other key aspects of organisational functions.

Quality assurance systems incorporate mechanisms that assess and maintain quality at national and institutional levels. The practice of quality assurance in higher education distinguishes between internal and external formats. Quality assurance becomes internal when it is established within a higher education institution for the purpose of assuring, maintaining and enhancing the quality of education and the standards of core operations. An external quality assurance, on the other hand, mainly involves an external body or, commonly, a quality assurance agency that monitors and evaluates the quality of higher education institutions. An internal quality assurance is primarily intra-institutional in its scope, whereas external quality assurance functions in an inter-institutional and supra-institutional context (Vlasceanu et al., 2007). Although the actual format of quality assurance may be contingent upon the size and shape of the higher education system, the scope might include dimensions of regulation, educational process, curriculum design and content, learning experience and learning outcomes (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002,

pp. 26-27). In an effort to address quality concerns at various levels, most countries around the world have now developed external mechanisms for quality evaluation (Szanto, 2005), and most higher education institutions have established internal procedures for quality evaluation (Harvey, 2002).

3.4.1 External quality assurance

External quality assurance agencies or bodies of this type are the primary mediums through which countries carry out the external quality monitoring on higher education institutions. External quality assurance agencies may differ from one another when examined with regard to their points of origin (how and by whom they were initiated), ownership (sponsorship), funding source, degree of autonomy, the number of agencies operating in a country, the level and scope of evaluation, the units and approaches of analysis, whether the evaluation of institutions is voluntary or compulsory, the purpose of the frameworks developed for self-evaluation at institutions, the nature and organisation of peer reviews, whether the outcomes of the external quality assurance are linked to funding and other sanctions, the nature of the evaluation results, whether the reporting of evaluations uses a formative or summative approach and whether the external quality assurance agencies themselves are subjected to monitoring and reviews (Billing, 2004; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Frazer, 1997; Harvey, 2002; Kells, 1999; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990).

Initiatives for the establishment of quality assurance agencies

External quality monitoring agencies may be statutory and non-statutory (Harvey, 2002, pp. 248-249). External quality assurance bodies are statutory when they are established by law or empowered by statutes, decrees or other types of legislations to monitor the quality of higher education institutions. Such agencies are often a part of or delegated by, funded by and accountable to governmental units, such as ministries or other branches of the state machinery. Most of the quality assurance agencies around the world, especially those whose function mainly involves conducting accreditation, incorporate components of a statutory nature. On the other hand, non-statutory quality monitoring bodies are those that are established without legislations and operate independently, are often either self-financed, owned by universities or collect fees from the institutions that they review. Such agencies may also include evaluation bodies affiliated with professional bodies, industries or

consultancy organisations. Further, these agencies usually conduct voluntary evaluations. Examples of such agencies can be found in the US, New Zealand, South Africa and Hong Kong. Such agencies exercise a substantial degree of independence from governmental pressures unlike a majority of statutory agencies.

Similarly, the analysis conducted by Kells (1995a, 1999) identifies a variety of sponsorships for national evaluation schemes. For instance, 'government agencies' that are sponsored, induced and strongly controlled by governments, 'independent agencies' that are financed by governments, agencies that are sponsored by professional and disciplinary guilds and 'independent agencies' that do not receive government financing and are mainly supported by a group of higher education institutions. It is relatively common for the external quality monitoring agencies having various legislative bases and origins to have autonomy over the use of their funds (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). Securing adequate human, financial and technical resources is crucial for the effective functioning and credibility of an external quality assurance agency (Woodhouse, 2004).

The external quality assurance of a nation's higher education may incorporate one or several quality assurance agencies. This may depend on the size of the higher education system, the level of differentiation within it and the predisposition of governments and higher education institutions towards inclusive or separate quality assurance agencies. In practice, mixed approaches are used across countries around the globe when it comes to depending on a single quality assurance agency or establishing separate quality assurance agencies that cater to the differentiation embedded in a particular national higher education system, such as public and private institutions; higher education, non-higher education (e.g. polytechnics, universities of applied sciences, vocational institutions), and all levels of education; and universities and non-university institutions (e.g. colleges, university colleges, research institutes, professional training institutes) (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002, p. 46). The experiences of countries are quite diverse in these regards. For instance, an inclusive approach for all types of higher education provision is used in countries such as the UK, Norway, France, Sweden and Ethiopia, while the national quality assurance agency in Finland and Denmark conduct evaluations at all levels of education. Further, separate quality assurance agencies cover university and non-university institutions in countries such as Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands. In some countries, public higher education institutions may not be subjected to national quality evaluation, such as in Portugal and Austria.

The autonomy of quality assurance agencies

External quality assurance agencies are mostly established inside the higher education sector or externally through the initiatives taken by governments or professional associations (Harvey, 2002). The literature suggests that, although governments initiate the establishment of the majority of the external quality assurance agencies around the world, there are instances where the association of higher education institutions have taken such initiatives on their own (e.g. in the cases of Belgium and the Netherlands) or through actions taken jointly with governments (e.g. in the cases of the UK and Germany) (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Hou et al., 2020).

Although external quality assurance agencies are mostly initiated and established by governments, the level of their operational autonomy varies considerably across quality assurance agencies and countries. For instance, quality assurance agencies in Western Europe tend to function more independently than those in Central and Eastern Europe (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Kells, 1995b). In Finland, although the government (through its Ministry of Education and Culture) actively steers the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), the Centre has considerable operational autonomy when it comes to conducting quality evaluations, determining the results of the evaluations and making decisions regarding whether to grant quality labels to higher education institutions. On the other hand, external quality assurance agencies in most African, Latin American and Asian countries and other parts of the developing world tend to function in environments that contain a significant degree of state control or, at least, affiliation, thus compromising the level of independence in the context of their operational matters.

The level of autonomy that external quality monitoring agencies are granted on legislations may not always be consistent with the real-life situation, which suggests that the actual degree of independence is influenced by factors such as the organisational culture, circumstances of the work environment, funding, the agencies' responsibilities to internal and external stakeholders, government priorities, political agendas and sanctions and degree of permanency (Harvey, 2002, pp. 249-250). The quality assurance agencies that are established by governments may have full autonomy in theory, but, in practice, they operate on a semi-autonomous basis and are funded and assigned by the government to undertake specific tasks. These agencies are operationally independent rather than being controlled by governments (Harvey, 2002, p. 250). Although any definite statement would be liable to disregard exceptional cases, most external quality assurance agencies established by

governments tend to encounter more pressure and regulation from governments than non-statutory bodies, which tend to function independently.

The degree of autonomy exercised by quality assurance agencies generally influences their legitimacy and impact. For instance, Harvey (2002) concludes that the evaluations conducted by the quality assurance agencies that are independent from governments and universities tend to be received positively and facilitate an environment that is conducive to improvements in quality. Independence and impartiality are necessary components of the regulatory framework employed by external quality assurance agencies (INQAAHE, 2016). Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) also reinforce such assertions by emphasising the growing understanding that a 'good' external quality assurance system prefers autonomous or semi-autonomous agencies, that have relatively higher legitimacy and capacity for enhancing internal quality processes in higher education institutions.

Instruments employed in external quality evaluations

Several authors indicate that convergences exist alongside divergences²⁴ in international external quality assurance practices (e.g. Billing, 2004; Van Damme, 2000). The analysis conducted by Aelterman (2006) identifies a considerable degree of comparability, and some flexibility, in the criteria, standards and codes employed by the major international networks of quality assurance agencies. Likewise, Van Vught and Westerheijden (1993) acknowledge the existence of some type of a 'general model'²⁵ that several countries and external quality assurance agencies around the world, modify in an attempt to make it suitable for the distinctive practical realities specific national higher education systems. This suggests the

²⁴ It is important to note that what some authors see as points of variation are also interpreted by others as examples of growing commonality.

²⁵ However, some authors argue that the size and degree of diversity within a higher education system, number of programmes, maturity and apparent quality of institutions, level of state regulation and institutional autonomy, views on the nature of university's role, broad national inclinations and circumstances, desired relationship of evaluation to funding, organisational and academic culture, established mind-set, cultural attributes, views on process and planned change and a range of other important factors may determine the extent to which certain commonalities and the 'general model' may be applicable in specific national contexts (Billing, 2004; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Frazer, 1997; Kells, 1999). These are examples of some of the factors that determine the variations seen in national evaluation schemes. In this regard, the authors question the international transferability of any national quality assurance framework to countries and higher education systems that have dissimilar contexts. Van Damme (2000) also questions the suitability of the 'general model' with regard to the challenges that higher education will face in the future. On balance, authors also acknowledge that most the elements of the 'general model' tend to apply to the situation observed in most countries.

existence of a growing overall commonality, notwithstanding the significant diversity, in the approaches to external quality assurance around the world (Harvey, 2002; Woodhouse, 1996).

External quality assurance agencies conduct accreditations, audits and quality assessments, set and check standards and disseminate information and good practices. An external inquiry into a higher education institution may come in the form of an academic audit, research assessment exercise, quality assessment, validation or external examiners (Colling & Harvey, 1995, p. 30). The accreditation of institutions and programmes are common external quality evaluation practices in the US and Central and Eastern Europe. Quality audits, on the other hand, are the main instruments used in Western Europe.

An external quality evaluation in higher education mainly uses self-assessment, performance indicators or statistical indicators, peer reviews and site visits (Harvey, 1998; Van Damme, 2000; Vroeijerstijn, 1995; Vroeijerstijn & Acherman, 1990). Such types of evaluations entail that higher education institutions conduct self-evaluations and submit the report²⁶ to the external evaluation agency, a team of academics conduct a peer review and site visits, and the review panel publish a report of the findings of the site visit (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002).

Self-evaluations constitute a crucial component of quality evaluation, where higher education institutions conduct internal assessments and reflect on their performances. It is widely understood that the self-evaluations conducted within a climate of trust and honesty would contribute to the findings being reflective of the actual performance of the institution and enhance their capacity to support quality improvements. Despite the popularity of employing performance and statistical indicators in evaluations, critiques highlight the limitations of such indicators in terms of being a valid and reliable operationalisation of quality in higher education which mainly arise from the indicators' simplistic nature and vague association with the parameters they are supposed to be indicative of (Harvey, 1998, 2002). The growing awareness regarding such limitations and controversial approaches to quality has facilitated the use of more qualitative evaluations.

The peer reviews involve a panel of esteemed academics and experts who conduct evaluations on-site through a series of intensive group discussions and observation of facilities. This typically takes one to four days to complete, during which the panel tries to confirm or relate the information provided in the self-assessment report with the practical reality of the higher education institution. The

²⁶ The self-evaluation report that is produced by higher education institutions as a part of the evaluation by an external body is treated as confidential information in most cases and, thus, is rarely published.

peer reviewers may represent academics, study programmes, professional associations or higher education institutions. The nature, composition and training of the experts who are a part of these peer review teams vary significantly between countries (Dill, 2000; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). The composition of the peer panels may be influenced by factors such as the purpose and aim of the external evaluation, the criteria used for recruiting and appointing peers, whether the focus is on balancing the quality, educational and professional expertise within the panel and the degree of independence with which the panel carries out the evaluation (Aelterman, 2006). In most cases, students participate in peer reviews and other forms of external evaluations. The peer review is an important mechanism for quality improvement, as academics, in relative terms, tend to respond favourable to reviews conducted by their peers than to procedures of control carried out by inspectors and administrators (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The review provides an opportunity for higher education institutions to conduct self-reflection, engage in dialogue and receive useful feedback.

On the other hand, peer reviews have their limitations. It is argued that such reviews are far from efficient at evaluating the quality of a higher education institution due to reasons such as the usually insufficient training provided to the peers before being sent for site visits, the potential discrepancies and gaps between the information provided in the self-assessment report and the perception of the peer reviewers, insufficient time spent by them directly observing the multiple facets of institutional operation (Billing, 2004; Frazer, 1997; Harvey, 1998, 2002, p. 257) and prior experience and preconceptions held by the peers. These factors influence the outcome of the peer view to a significant extent. In addition, Clark (1997, p. 221) identifies some recurrent dilemmas and problems with external evaluations involving peer reviews, which are mainly associated with 1) the extent to which the academics in the peer review panel should be, in fact, regarded as peers or experts in the fields they review and 2) the nature and consistency on their judgment. The accuracy of their judgements is dependent on the relativity of the frames of reference used by the experts in the peer review team while conducting evaluations, which are influenced by, for instance, the gap between the standard practice of teaching and learning and the continuous advancements in technology. The issue of how clearly and transparently the team of these experts can develop frames of reference for the external evaluation is an important aspect when examining the credibility of the evaluation methodology (Thune, 1997).

External quality assurance agencies, as a common practice, publish²⁷ the results of the quality evaluation they conduct on higher education institutions in the form of reports that are accessible to stakeholders and the general public. The results of the external quality assessments are typically not directly connected with ranking and funding (Thune, 1997; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). It is desirable for governments to not take direct actions using judgement predicated upon the outcomes of external quality evaluations. In many countries, external evaluations are commonly followed by some types of structured follow up processes to assist the development work to be undertaken by the externally reviewed higher education institutions (Billing, 2004). Higher education institutions must be held responsible for implementing the recommendations received from external evaluations. It is crucial for external evaluations to be accompanied by internal mechanisms, processes and initiatives in order to bring about lasting improvements in higher education institutions.

Most external quality evaluations tend to have a comprehensive scope, and the trend seems to be towards covering every aspect of higher education (Harvey, 2002). The evaluations of external quality assurance agencies may focus on the entire institution, study programmes, departments and disciplinary programmes, education (teaching and content), research profile or internal quality assurance systems (Kells, 1999). The evaluations cover several aspects of the teaching, learning, research and societal engagement functions of higher education institutions (Harvey, 2002). External evaluations heed to the input, process and output of teaching and learning, such as including the curriculum, qualification of staff and students, mode of delivery, assessment, learning outcomes and competencies, resources and facilities and employability. External scrutiny is expected to ensure accountability, enhance quality and respect, provide sufficient room for institutional autonomy (Aelterman, 2006; Colling & Harvey, 1995; Woodhouse, 2004) and conduct its functions in a practical, efficient and effective manner. The design of the external evaluation, the evaluation criteria to be employed and the expectations from the key actors involved in the process need to be defined explicitly and agreed upon through consultation between external quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and other stakeholders (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Woodhouse, 2004). The transparency of objectives and their relevance to the operations of higher education institutions are particularly important for quality evaluation procedures (Colling & Harvey, 1995). Nonetheless, it is important to note that the specific aim, nature and focus of an

²⁷ The practice of making evaluation reports accessible to the public may become controversial in countries, where there is a belief that the confidentiality of reports can encourage openness, honesty and critical self-reflection among higher education institutions.

operation, the components of evaluation, criteria and standards of evaluation, the coverage of the level and sector of education and the characteristics of an external quality evaluation significantly vary across external quality assurance agencies and national higher education systems.

In more general terms, Kogan (1990) distinguishes between three models of evaluation in higher education that are argued to correspond to the different modes of governance, management and policy-making within which they fit. It is posited that the 'peer review' constitutes the traditional model of evaluation in higher education, wherein an autonomous academy evaluates itself through peers and collegium based on criteria that are specific to disciplines. In contrast to such traditional and elite academic evaluations, Kogan (1990) states that a 'command or managerialist' model features the undertaking of an evaluation in higher education mainly based on the objectives for education and the criteria pre-set by governments. Such evaluation models seek a compromise between the judgements of academics and institutional managers, on one hand, and the evaluation conducted by central governments on the other. Accordingly, the allocation of resources by governments and funding bodies for higher education institutions around the world is increasingly becoming contingent upon such explicitly defined criteria. Last, Kogan (1990) discusses a 'market-led'²⁸ evaluation model, which employs market considerations and the criteria of the open market when evaluating higher education. The three models of evaluations can be applied in manners that complement each other. In practice, the criteria used for evaluations in higher education therefore incorporate elements of academia and disciplinary grounds, government objectives and market forces.

Another important issue that is a topic of frequent discussion is cost. The cost of an external quality evaluation may be determined by the size of the higher education system, the types of higher education institutions, whether the focus of the evaluation is on the institutional, programme or course level, the frequency of evaluations, the remuneration given to the experts on the external evaluation teams (also affected by the size of such panels and committees) and the amount of time spent on the evaluation (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Vroeijsstijn, 1995). Another way of assessing the cost-benefit aspect of an external evaluation can be through examining the value, applicability and effectiveness of the recommendations forwarded by the team of experts that carry out the evaluation. The

²⁸ Despite the significance of employing such an evaluation being widely recognised, scholars, such as Neave (1998), are wary of the tendency of the intermediary quality assurance bodies extending the market and customer orientations and the principle of privatisation to the sphere of public service.

recommendations provided to higher education institutions also need to be realistic, operational and constructive. They are expected to assist higher education institutions in determining the priorities regarding the short-term and long-term measures that they need to take. Moreover, the necessary precautions have to be taken, such as avoiding the duplication of evaluations (Kells, 1999), in order to ensure that the benefits of an evaluation outweigh its cost for higher education institutions, external quality assurance agencies and governments and fund providers (Colling & Harvey, 1995). External quality assurance agencies are responsible for minimising the cost and maximising the benefits of an external evaluation.

Meta-evaluations: Quality assurance of quality assurance agencies

In addition to evaluating the quality of higher education institutions, external quality assurance agencies are expected to undergo meta-evaluations, which involve monitoring and evaluating the performance, effectiveness and impact of an external quality assurance agency (Billing, 2004; Frazer, 1997; Woodhouse, 2004). This is essentially the concept of assessing the assessor, evaluating the evaluator and inspecting the inspector. The practice can be seen as a meta-evaluation—an internal and external evaluation of a quality assurance agency— or, as Szanto (2005) defines it, ‘evaluations of the third kind’.

Utilising quality evaluations for inducing improvements in teaching and learning requires paying closer attention to the impact that the evaluations have on academic quality, the monitoring and evaluation of the monitors and evaluators (i.e. central authorities and institutions of government such as national evaluation bodies and funding councils) and the system of policy-making in higher education (Kogan, 1990). Such critical examinations of the value and effects of national quality assurance agencies are crucial for developments in the approaches employed for quality monitoring. Quality assurance and higher education evaluation systems evolve and improve with time, as increasing efforts are made towards developing more useful mechanisms of quality monitoring within higher education institutions (Kells, 1999).

Meta-evaluations may focus on critically assessing a range of issues, such as how clearly the aims and goals of an external quality assurance agency are formulated, how controlled and proper the processes of realising these goals are, how competent, credible and impartial the external quality assurance agency is, how clearly the concept of quality is defined, how clear, transparent and effective the evaluation methods, criteria and frames of reference are, how properly the external quality

evaluation is conducted, how clear, accurate, realistic and workable the recommendations offered to the higher education institutions are, how participatory is the process of the external evaluation for internal and external stakeholders, how effectively the external evaluation addresses the concerns and demands of students, academic staff, management, government, fund providers and employers, how rigorous the self-assessment carried out by the higher education institutions is, how relevant and professional the experts are in the peer review panel, how independent the team of experts is when conducting the peer review, how cost- and time-efficient the external evaluation is, and, finally, how comprehensive, consistent and evidence-based the evaluation report is (Thune, 1997, pp. 65-68). This indicates that external quality assurance agencies hardly operate in obscurity. On the contrary, the academic staff, students, management, governments, experts serving in peer panels and other stakeholders critically assess the overall process and performance of an external quality evaluation agency.

The practice of evaluating the appropriateness of the procedures employed in external evaluations and of assuring the quality of external quality assurance agencies themselves helps facilitate the mutual recognition and acceptance of the evaluation results among external quality assurance agencies, reinforces the legitimacy and internal and external accountability of agencies, contributes to the development of agencies by identifying their strengths and weaknesses and promotes trust and confidence in their operations (Szanto, 2005). Such evaluations play an instrumental role in ensuring that quality assurance agencies adhere to national, regional and global expectations, standards and good practices. An important aspect that contributes to a relevant and well-grounded meta-evaluation is the due consideration and understanding of the historical, social, economic and political context in which a quality assurance agency that is under review functions.

The international and regional networks of quality assurance agencies play an important role in the sharing of experiences and good practices and in encouraging external and self-administered reviews among their member agencies. For instance, INQAAHE promotes its member external quality assurance agencies to demonstrate their voluntary adherence to the (Guidelines of Good Practices) GGP through an external review and recognition (INQAAHE, 2016, p. 12; Morse, 2006). One of the procedures for checking this adherence involves the external quality assurance agency conducting a self-assessment, preparing reports and undergoing an external review that includes an on-site review by a team of experts selected by INQAAHE. Another method entails a quality assurance agency undergoing a joint external review by INQAAHE and another partner external agency (for instance,

ENQA). A third procedure allows a quality assurance agency, which has been reviewed by a reputable external organisation (such as the Council for Higher Education Accreditation and ENQA) against a set of standards equivalent to or those that exceed the requirements given in the GGP put forth by INQAAHE, to obtain recognition and acceptance from INQAAHE. Those quality assurance agencies that are able to effectively demonstrate their adherence to the standards set by the GGP are granted a label²⁹. In general, a meta-evaluation entails a self-evaluation and external review of the external quality assessment mechanisms of an external quality assurance agency.

Such international efforts promote the culture of carrying out self-assessments and peer assessments among quality assurance agencies in higher education. The capacity of such initiatives for enhancing the legitimacy, accountability and trustworthiness of quality assurance agencies and for contributing to improvements in the procedures of external quality evaluation in higher education is substantial. Although the number of countries that conduct meta-evaluations of the system of evaluation and the control of quality carried out by national higher education evaluation schemes used to be small (Kells, 1999), the practice is increasingly being adopted by national quality assurance agencies and their networks.

Besides the practice of self-evaluation and external reviews contributing to developments in external quality evaluation, the functioning of external quality assurance agencies, in practice, is simultaneous with the internal processes and procedures of quality monitoring at higher education institutions (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). In fact, the development of internal quality assurance mechanisms and the entrenchment of a quality culture at higher education institutions that promote continuous quality improvements determine the degree to which an external quality evaluation is effective in the long run (Harvey, 1998).

3.4.2 Internal quality assurance

The logic behind the establishment of internal quality assurance can be located in the arguments that stress that the responsibility of quality assurance and the heart of the quality evaluation culture, in the long run, primarily lies with, and must be owned by, higher education institutions and their internal processes (Colling & Harvey,

²⁹ Such practices (including the idea of establishing a registry of agencies who comply with the GGP, as indicated by Morse (2006) have been criticised for their implied tendencies to lead to the creation of unintended stratification among quality assurance agencies.

1995; Genis, 2002; INQAAHE, 2016; Kells, 1999; Vroeijsstijn, 1995). Higher education institutions are responsible for monitoring the quality of their own functions (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Kettunen, 2012; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Woodhouse, 2004). Moreover, the external efforts regarding quality evaluations need to be supported with internal procedures and processes at higher education institutions for the sake of accountability and for the improvement goals of quality assurance to get fulfilled effectively (Colling & Harvey, 1995; Genis, 2002; Thune, 1997; Vroeijsstijn & Acherman, 1990). The Conference of European Ministers responsible for higher education, which was a follow up of the progress towards the Bologna Declaration, also reaffirmed the cardinal principle that the main responsibility for assuring and enhancing quality in higher education primarily lies with each individual higher education institution (Berlin Communiqué, 2003).

Purpose and instruments of internal quality evaluations

The practice of internal quality monitoring, assurance and evaluation involves procedures and processes that are crucial for higher education institutions to ensure the standards of their institutional operations and improve the quality of their academic functions. The purpose of internal quality assurance is to assess the extent to which a higher education institution progresses towards effectively and efficiently achieving its defined objectives and missions. Internal quality monitoring processes support higher education institutions in identifying their strengths that require reinforcement, the areas in need of corrective action and development and the good practices that can support broader improvements if shared across an institution. Ideally, Kells (1992) argues that an autonomous and self-regulating higher education institution is expected to regularly review institution-wide and programme level intentions, clarify and allocate responsibility for evaluations, results and follow ups, select staff and students through effective processes, assess and control output, build active information system, review itself periodically and act on the acquired results.

Internal quality evaluations tend to be more thorough in their approaches to the assessment of institutional functions as compared to evaluations undertaken by an external quality monitoring agency. As pointed out by Kells (1995b), self-assessment at higher education institutions may incorporate important aspects, such as periodic institutional level reviews and planning, cyclical programme reviews, human resources (selection, orientation, appraisal and development) and control processes. Kettunen (2012) argues that internal quality assurance must primarily serve the purpose of managing and improving operational processes within a higher education

institution. In doing so, such systems provide useful information regarding the activities of an institution to its internal and external stakeholders. It enhances the public's confidence in the educational services that an institution provides by demonstrating to stakeholders that relevant systematic processes, procedures and mechanisms are in place and that the institution utilises these internal quality monitoring practices to inform improvements in its performance. In general, the scope of internal quality assurance may focus on enhancing continuous improvements at the institution, programme, module and individual levels (e.g. self-reflection, evaluation by clients, managers or bosses, and colleagues) (Harvey, 2002; Kells, 1995b).

An internal quality assessment entails coordination and the exchange of information between the involved actors (Kettunen, 2012), which constitutes undertaking an institution-wide self-evaluation, preparing self-assessment report and other necessary documents, introducing internal quality assurance processes to external reviewers, comprising and briefing the panels of management, academic staff, students and other stakeholders who will meet with peer reviewers for discussion and providing general logistics support. The documentation of the relevant evidence is crucial in such processes of self-appraisal. Higher education institutions are expected to document evidence that proves that their internal quality assurance mechanisms are functioning adequately. External quality assurance agencies expect higher education institutions to provide information about their efforts on self-evaluation and quality improvement to the public (Woodhouse, 2004). The information higher education institutions relinquish to the external quality monitoring bodies are mainly gathered, analysed, organised and reported through such internal quality assessment mechanisms. Internal quality assurance structures also play a vital role in the developmental work that higher education institutions embark on after receiving feedback from external and internal reviews.

The influence of collegial processes tends to become more important than the formal managerialist arrangements in systems of internal quality monitoring, while the opposite more closely characterises external quality evaluations. Internal quality monitoring involves the participation of the university management, senate, directors, academic staff, students, boards, committees and groups and external examiners and consultants. The active involvement and commitment of the academic and non-academic staff and students is imperative for internal quality assurance mechanisms to function well and contribute to meaningful improvements in the quality of a higher education institution (Kettunen, 2012; Rippin et al., 1994). The members of the academic staff are expected to adequately carry out the

collective responsibilities for critical self-reflection and quality improvement with regard to professional engagements (Colling & Harvey, 1995).

Diversity of characteristics in internal quality assurance

The nature and formats of internal quality assurance mechanisms vary across higher education institutions. In most cases, higher education institutions set up a designated structure (often indicated as a bureau, office, department, unit, directorate or centre) for internal quality assurance and provide the necessary human, financial and material resources for it. Usually, such internal structures have some type of policy, regulation or guideline that defines its objectives, internal organisation and management, chain of command, duties and responsibilities, internal processes of quality assurance and the modus operandi of the quality unit. Some higher education institutions may not have such designated units in their organisational structure and, instead, may designate task forces, ad hoc committees or certain groups of personnel to take responsible for conducting specific types of internal evaluations. Nevertheless, some higher education institutions make conscious decisions to avoid having separate units or networks of individuals that are designated with the task of monitoring quality. Instead, they integrate the responsibilities for quality management with everyday work (for instance, as a part of the job description of each position) in an effort to engage everyone with the work on quality³⁰. Regardless of such variations, developing a robust internal quality assurance system generally requires having informed leadership, trusting environment, adequate resources (such as finance, technical expertise, information systems), professionals who lead the process and a growing culture of evaluation (Kells, 1995b).

It is necessary to tailor internal quality assurance mechanisms to the specific strategic needs, missions and objectives, disciplinary and research profiles, organisational culture, staff dynamics, specific expectations of stakeholders and nature of a higher education institution. This relates to the fact that developing a universal model for internal quality assurance is very difficult, if not impossible, and any such harmonised model would not work for all higher education institutions. Quality assurance procedures must be designed by the higher education institution itself instead of being externally prescribed (Dill, 1998). However, it is possible to develop certain common baseline standards that are to be fulfilled by all internal quality assurance systems while simultaneously providing sufficient scope for

³⁰ For example, the University of Oulu in Finland employs this type of system.

diversity and flexibility in institutions. For instance, conducting internal quality evaluations may require higher education institutions to develop frameworks for self-assessment in accordance with the requirements of an external quality monitoring agency (Rippin et al., 1994). Moreover, the findings and recommendations obtained from an external evaluation may also affect the design of an institutional quality assessment (Kettunen, 2012).

The external pressures aimed at completely harmonising internal quality assurance models across higher education institutions can be intrusive with respect to institutional autonomy. Internal quality assurance mechanisms with considerable autonomy and flexibility regarding institutional innovation are typically better positioned to respond to specific institutional demands and contribute to improvements in the quality and efficiency of institutional performance than those confined to adopting a model developed elsewhere. Since the ownership of the quality assurance processes belongs to higher education institutions, they must be made responsible for designing and developing their internal procedures of self-regulation and quality monitoring (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

Consistent with such arguments, Kells (1999) asserts that well-developed internal evaluation schemes, institution-based approaches and a culture of self-regulation at higher education institutions yields more benefits and support continuous internal quality improvements than the highly rigid, 'one-off' and externally directed national evaluation schemes. Often liberating in nature, institutional quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms are believed to empower the capacity of higher education institutions with regard to self-regulation, quality improvement, innovation, and responsiveness to the demands of stakeholders (Billing, 2004). The desirable characteristics of an effective internal quality assurance and improvement system are that it should be institution-centred, developmental in nature, transparent and honest, continuous, adequately funded, externally validated and responsive to the needs of stakeholders (Kells, 1995b). In practice, the internal quality assurance evaluations are performed simultaneously with the evaluations of quality conducted by an entity external to higher education institutions.

3.5 The links between external and internal quality assurance

The section below discusses three key links between external and internal quality assurance. These include the overall links in function, structure, coordination and

communication, the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement and the tensions between accountability and improvement purposes.

3.5.1 Links in function, structure, coordination and communication

External and internal quality assurance are linked by function, structure, interaction and exchange of information, coordination and the impact created in association with the process of managing and supervising the relevance and quality of higher education at the system and institutional levels. A brief discussion on these issues is presented below.

Functionally, a symbiotic relationship exists between external and internal quality evaluations (Harvey, 2002). The existence of the interdependence between the two is crucial for the effectiveness of a quality assurance system. An external quality evaluation is never an end in itself; instead, it is required to complement the institutional systems of quality assurance (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The desired impacts of external and internal quality assurance systems would be substantially hampered if either one functioned in isolation from the other. It is important to understand, from a strictly critical point of view, that neither external nor internal quality assurance is immune from criticism or is sufficient on its own. When the two function in synergy, however, they form a unified quality assurance system that addresses both system- and institutional-level concerns.

In an effort to enhance the impact of quality assurance on improvements in quality, the momentum for establishing more visible and firm links between external quality monitoring and the internal quality improvement procedures is growing (Harvey, 1998). In order for an external quality evaluation to be effective in the long run, it needs to be supported with the internal mechanisms of quality monitoring and the development of a continuous quality improvement culture at higher education institutions (Harvey, 1998). On the other hand, the effectiveness of external quality evaluations requires the use of consultative and developmental evaluation frameworks that have the capacity to support the internal quality improvement initiatives (Genis, 2002). An external scrutiny of quality aims to enhance the quality of higher education and its products by supporting and motivating higher education institutions, particularly their staff and students, to enhance their capacity related for carrying out the responsibilities and roles related to quality monitoring (Colling & Harvey, 1995). Such arguments highlight that external quality assurance plays an important role in supporting the institutional

efforts that are targeted at bringing about improvements in quality. The impacts of an external quality evaluation must lead to improvements in teaching and learning.

Understanding the relationship between external and internal quality assurance entails, in addition to analysing functional ties, the exploration of the nature of structure, the organisation of responsibilities, the driving purposes and the communication that links the external and internal quality assurance mechanisms. Entities that are external to higher education institutions carry out external quality assurance, whereas internal quality assurance is an institution-wide effort mainly led by a designated unit or task force. The structural link between the two bodies may range from an explicit chain of command to loose communication channels through which official requests, instructions and reports are exchanged. External quality assurance bodies, often empowered by legislations, exercise authority over higher education institutions when conducting external evaluations, determining the results of the evaluations and granting or withdrawing accreditations, licenses, and quality labels. What is common despite the variations in the internal organisational structures of quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions is the existence of some type of structural linkage that makes it possible to coordinate the responsibilities and efforts related to quality assurance at the national and institutional levels.

External quality assurance influences the structure, design and implementation of internal quality assurance. Depending on the specific circumstances of a higher education system, for instance, external quality assurance agencies provide evaluation frameworks and guidelines for developing the internal quality assurance processes and mechanisms (Kells, 1992). Although the criteria used for quality evaluations need to be agreed upon by both the higher education institutions and the external quality assurance agencies (Genis, 2002), they are often developed in a manner that safeguards the interests of the external bodies.

The goals and responsibilities of external and internal quality assurance are complementary despite the tensions regarding purposes and power dynamics, and the synergy of efforts constitutes the essence of national quality assurance systems. The tension between the accountability orientation of external quality assurance and the improvement tendency of internal quality assurance indicates the existence of a certain degree of conflict in the driving purposes of quality monitoring. In her case study, Genis (2002) states a range of issues as factors that contribute to the tensions between the requirements of external quality assurance and the approaches to institutional quality assurance, such as the changing interpretations of quality, differences in orientating quality assurance along the accountability-improvement

continuum, frameworks of institutional and programme evaluation, nature of reporting to the external quality assurance body, methodology of external evaluation and effectiveness of the external validation teams.

In terms of coordination and the exchange of information, quality assurance is a collective team effort that requires robust collaboration, communication and cooperation between the actors and stakeholders involved in the process of supporting continuous quality improvements, such as external quality monitoring agencies, higher education institutions, managers, academic and non-academic staff, students and other stakeholders (Colling & Harvey, 1995). Regular sharing of information, communication, reporting and follow up processes between external quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions are necessary for the functioning of national quality assurance systems (Genis, 2002). Such coordination and communication may become routine or remain active only during the period of evaluations.

In addition to the discussion presented above, it is important to understand that the relationship between external and internal quality assurance is a broad topic. It requires further interpretation, for instance, in terms of the relationship between the concepts of quality assurance and quality enhancement and the tensions between the accountability and improvement functions of quality assurance.

3.5.2 The relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement

One aspect of analysing the trust relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions requires the understanding of the relationship between the concepts of quality assurance for accountability and quality enhancement. The rationale for this can be found in the review of the literature on quality in higher education, which suggests that the essence of external quality monitoring is widely associated with the concept of quality assurance, whereas internal quality monitoring is commonly considered to be closer to the concept of quality enhancement³¹.

When summarising the essence of quality enhancement, Williams (2016) emphasises two crucial aspects of the concept: an orientation towards the

³¹ It is important to note that this categorisation is not mutually exclusive or rigid. This study acknowledges that both external and internal quality monitoring approaches embody within them aspects of both quality assurance and enhancement. This section bases its arguments on a relative conceptual affinity, which is, for instance, that the distinctive characteristics of external quality monitoring more closely resemble the traditional conceptualisation and philosophical view on quality assurance than quality enhancement.

enhancement of student learning, and the improvement in the quality of an institution and its education programmes. This suggests that the notion of enhancement is far higher and deeper in meaning and scale than improvement. Similarly, Rippin et al. (1994) argue that quality enhancement should simultaneously address two crucial and interdependent dimensions: the enhancement of overall academic quality (including enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and stimulating the research environment) and the student experience (including the quality of services provided to them). This highlights that the results of quality assessments and audits must lead to improvements that are tangible. Similarly, Lomas's (2004) perception of quality enhancement focuses on transformation, although the target of the transformation, in this case, is the institution as a whole. The *Analytic Quality Glossary* also tends to view quality enhancement in terms of the broader processes that are geared towards augmentation (Harvey, 2004-17).

Regardless of the existence of various complex definitions of quality assurance and quality enhancement (Harvey, 2007), the relationship between the two key concepts of quality in higher education is still far from being properly understood (Williams, 2016). This section presents how some researchers explain this important issue.

In this regard, perhaps one of the most useful published works is the article written by Williams (2016), which identifies a range of perspectives on the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement: when treated as separate entities, when treated as opposite to each other, when quality assurance leads to quality enhancement and when the two are considered integral components of the same process. It is possible to interpret from the author's discussion that the first two notions see quality assurance and quality enhancement as separate and distinct entities and, therefore, can be addressed individually. The other two notions tend to consider quality assurance and enhancement to be intricately linked and mutually complementary processes and mostly sees the former as informing the latter, which, thus, necessitates the engagement of stakeholders, especially the teaching staff and students. Interestingly, the author associates these notions with the competing values that different stakeholders attach to the nature of the approaches employed when dealing with quality in higher education. For instance, while external stakeholders tend to place more emphasis on the procedures and processes that ensure accountability and the compliance with standards, higher education institutions (particularly, teachers and students) tend to prefer mechanisms that enhance the quality of academic functions, student learning and the institution as a whole over those that are more associated with the managerial pressure for

demonstrating accountability. These contending perceptions of the work related to quality partly account for the tendency to view and treat quality assurance and quality enhancement separately. Quality assurance is characterised by a top-down approach, while quality enhancement exhibits the attributes of a bottom-up initiative. It also becomes apparent that, in relative terms, quality enhancement is often perceived more positively than quality assurance.

In line with the perspective of considering quality assurance and quality enhancement as integrated processes, Colling and Harvey (1995) argue that quality enhancement occurs when the results of the quality assessment obtained from external evaluations are linked to the continuous improvement of quality at a given higher education institution. In this context, quality enhancement is seen to link quality control, quality assurance and quality assessment together and creates an environment where this synergy enhances the capacity of an institution to continuously improve its quality. Such an approach emphasises the roles and collective responsibilities that academic staff have to fulfil for such processes to succeed.

Assuming a view of mixed perspectives, the discussion by Mkhize and Cassimjee (2013) seems to consider quality assurance and quality enhancement to simultaneously be separate and interdependent. The authors agree with the analysis that underscores the bureaucratic and constraining nature of quality assurance and argue in favour of an enhancement approach that is more pro-active and includes vigorous grassroots engagement. Quality enhancement is considered less constraining for the academic staff and promotes a culture of self-reflection. Such analysis shares the predominantly less favourable attitude towards quality assurance. On the other hand, quality assurance and quality enhancement are considered to share a positive and complementary relationship. Quality enhancement also involves identifying and disseminating the good practices that are uncovered by the quality assurance processes.

In contrast, Lomas (2004) sees quality assurance and quality enhancement as two principal approaches to quality improvement. The author mainly associates quality assurance with evaluation (serving preventive purposes) and quality enhancement with capacity-building (with an emphasis on curative functions). It is emphasised that quality enhancement tends to be more transformative in nature. The interdependence between the two is noted in the notion of quality assurance being a means of achieving quality enhancement (Lomas, 2004). Hence, quality needs to be consistently embedded into the organisational culture of a higher education institution and be supported with a culture of continuous improvement that has been

systematically inculcated in the academic work. The role of transformative leadership in such processes is crucial. Interestingly, although Lomas (2004) argues that quality enhancement is an important component of quality assurance, he goes on to claim that, unlike quality assurance, quality enhancement provides a reliable approach that is capable of guaranteeing the embedding of quality (and quality culture) in higher education institutions. Consistent with these views, Yorke (1996) also affirms that the enhancement of quality should be prioritised over quality assessment.

Although quality assurance and quality enhancement are not the same, they are interrelated concepts of the same continuum, where the former emphasises assessment for diagnostic purposes, while the latter heeds to conducting treatments for improvement (Elassy, 2015). Quality assurance is primarily associated with the summative assessment of quantitative performance, whereas quality enhancement pursues the formative process of qualitative performance. Despite the increasing desire for quality enhancement procedures over quality assurance, both processes are necessary in higher education.

The dynamics of the quality agenda, including the trends of quality assurance and quality enhancement, are mainly determined by the politics of higher education (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). It is stated that higher education institutions (including organisations that lobby on behalf of higher education institutions), states and quasi-state actors (independent or state-affiliated agencies such as quality assurance agencies and funding councils) have considerable stakes in the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. The political process involving these pressure groups shape the setting of the quality agenda (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). This was the case in Britain in the 1990s, which led to a shift from quality assurance to quality enhancement. Such shifts to quality enhancement are claimed to have weakened quality assurance. In such contexts, quality enhancement is believed to afford more freedom and autonomy to institutions and enable developments in quality, whereas quality assurance is seen to be primarily associated with evaluating performance against the stated standards and, thus, perceived as relatively narrow and more limited in nature. Similar to the works discussed above, Filippakou and Tapper (2008) indicate two types of relationships that exist between quality assurance and quality enhancement: first, as entities with an intrinsic tension between them, which results in a destructive relationship (because one is seen as having little to do with the other, to the extent of claiming that quality assurance could damage quality itself) and, second, as interactive processes that share a positive interdependent relationship.

In general, quality assurance and quality enhancement, despite the differences in conceptualisation, are widely regarded as the major approaches to addressing the issue of quality in higher education. Quality assurance and quality control are mainly considered to serve the purpose of assessing the current performance of higher education institutions and evaluating their compliance with the predefined standards and expectations, which essentially relates to ensuring the accountability of higher education institutions to the respective stakeholders. It is nevertheless widely understood that an evaluation of performance and the compliance with standards is not sufficient in itself for quality development³², thereby underscoring the need for more direct enhancement mechanisms and processes. On the other hand, there is a growing tendency of seeing quality enhancement as going beyond assessing the current performance and emphasising the proactive procedures and processes that are aimed to instil the culture of the continuous improvement and development of the quality of core operations³³. In terms of making such temporal differentiations, Lomas (2004) and Mkhize and Cassimjee (2013) underscore the tendency of quality assurance to be concerned with the immediate past and present, whereas quality enhancement refers to the future.

A considerable preference for better quality enhancement orientations in the research and practice of the quality agenda in higher education is evident from the analysis of the literature. It seems that the dissatisfaction with the perceived tendencies of quality assurance to emphasise accountability, compliance, top-down orientation, bureaucratic regulation and the constraining atmosphere it breeds for academic functions and institutional autonomy tends to overshadow the value and role that quality assurance has been playing in dealing with quality issues in higher education. Another key issue is that everyone in the institution needs to be committed and actively engaged if quality enhancement and a culture of continuous improvement are to form integral parts of institutional character. Last, the literature

³² The study conducted by Mkhize and Cassimjee (2013, pp. 1268-1269) identifies some of the reasons why quality assurance and external reviews may have limited direct impacts or, in certain cases, side effects on the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. These reasons include academics playing the quality game (impression management) (also indicated in Newton (2000, 2002)), the distrust towards rigid regulatory systems, the responsibility for quality maintenance dominated by external agencies instead of academics, the focus on examining documents rather than teaching itself, the lack of sufficient examination of the instruments employed in quality control and the resultant distrust and the time-consuming nature of the monitoring procedures reduces the amount of time that can be dedicated to teaching and research.

³³ The notion of looking at quality enhancement as a consequence of quality assurance is disputed by some researchers. For instance, Elton (2001) argues quite the opposite, claiming that quality assurance is a by-product of quality enhancement. This perspective does not seem to be consistent with what is argued and empirically supported by the majority of literature that the researcher covered on the topic.

suggests that developing a standardised blueprint for quality is a difficult task, since each higher education institution (including each departmental unit in it), the nature of its academic and non-academic staff and the organisational culture are significantly unique and diverse.

The main issues in the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement are considerably associated with the tensions that exist between the accountability and improvement purposes of quality monitoring. The following section discusses this issue in detail.

3.5.3 The tensions between accountability and improvement purposes

External quality assurance mainly serves two purposes, namely ensuring accountability and enhancing quality improvements. The mechanisms of an external quality assurance are expected to promote accountability, improve teaching and learning, support decision-making and provide information to the public. In practice, some elements from each purpose are found within the same quality assurance system. There has been a continuous debate regarding the purpose on which quality assurance should predominantly focus (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey, 1998, 2002; Thune, 1997; Vroeijsstijn & Acherman, 1990). Such dilemmas about the primary purposes of quality assurance entail conflicts in the types of methods and instruments employed by quality systems to fulfil these purposes. The issue of governments or higher education institutions establishing and owning a quality assurance process contributes to the dominance of the accountability or improvement orientation within a quality assurance system (Thune, 1997).

Accountability as a dominant orientation

The current trend suggests that quality assurance systems in many countries remain preoccupied with fulfilling the accountability purpose. The widespread use of accountability and market-oriented approaches for steering higher education has become a typical feature of the relationship between governments and higher education institutions (Dill, 2000). In spite of this trend, there is an apparent confusion among higher education institutions and governments regarding what aspects that accountability should be concerned with, while reaching a seeming consensus regarding the aim of quality improvement (Lemaitre, 2002; Vroeijsstijn,

1995). The plurality of views does not preclude the identification of certain common aspects of the accountability feature of quality systems.

The accountability requirement requires higher education institutions to demonstrate to external stakeholders how they monitor their quality and conduct quality assurance (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Higher education institutions are required to undergo accountability checks for their internal steering and self-regulation. Institutions are expected to demonstrate their compliance to the goals, interests and demands of external stakeholders, such as policy-makers and fund providers (Lemaitre, 2002). Accountability involves an institution ensuring and informing stakeholders and the public about the standard of the educational services it provides (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). This requires higher education institutions to be explicit about how they spend public resources. These demands for the efficient utilisation of resources extend to demonstrating evidence regarding the value for money in educational services that are provided to customers. As a part of the accountability requirement, external quality evaluations usually produce publicly accessible reports about the outcomes of the evaluations.

The accountability purpose serves to safeguard the interests of stakeholders and ensure that higher education institutions carry out their fundamental missions in a manner that conforms to the defined standards and expectations regarding societal responsibility. However, this aim has come under severe criticism with respect to its weaknesses and the undesirable consequences it has for higher education institutions and their efforts towards quality improvement. Understanding the major concerns with accountability can provide an insight into the reasons behind the limited capacity that most of the current quality assurance mechanisms tend to have in terms of contributing to continuous improvements in the quality of academic functions.

Accountability as burdening, intrusive and constraining

In predominantly compulsory and accountability-led external evaluations, higher education institutions more often than not tend to mostly perceive external quality assurance agencies as bureaucratic, patronising and intrusive in nature (Aelterman, 2006). Consistent with such arguments, Kells (1999) states that these types of national evaluation systems are expensive and patronising, use political approaches to fulfil accountability requirements and have an impact that is often weaker than that created by the robust culture of self-regulation at higher education institutions.

With their considerable emphasis on requiring the staff to generate evidence of their efforts in quality assurance—often in the form of documentations—external quality reviews can actually interrupt, retard and hinder the process of normal working practices, thus hampering improvements in quality (Colling & Harvey, 1995). Quality assurance requirements may burden higher education institutions with overwhelming continuous assessments that lead to the faculty spending more time on continually demonstrating evidence of accountability to external stakeholders than on working to enhance quality (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). This underscores the importance of drawing attention to the costs and burdening effects created by having multiple evaluations (Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Kells, 1999). Such orientations can threaten the normal motivation and commitment of the staff to carry out their quality assurance responsibilities. This indicates that necessary precautions should be taken to ensure that an external quality scrutiny, particularly its inherently accountability-directed nature, does not undermine or work against the internal processes of quality improvement. An external quality assurance is expected to be practical and not overburden or detract the academic activities of higher education institutions. It is argued that the emphasis should be on accommodating the requirements for quality assurance in ways that motivate higher education institutions to strive for improving the quality of their academic functions rather than relying on approaches that overwhelm institutions (Genis, 2002).

In his study, Newton (2002, p. 46) found that academics perceive quality and quality monitoring as ‘ritualism and tokenism’ that are used to satisfy the requirements of external stakeholders, as a system that is vulnerable to ‘impression management’ and scripted portrayals of institutional performance rather than an assessment based on genuine accounts, as a ‘burden’ and time consuming to academics, as a system that fails to comprehensively assess all key areas of services and is subjected to a ‘failure to close the loop’, as a manifestation of the ‘suspicion of management motives’ that essentially threatens the autonomy of academics, as a ‘discipline and technology’ in which quality assurance systems are seen to be distinct from quality itself, an initiative that often faces ‘front-line staff resistance’, as a practice that manifests a ‘lack of mutual trust’ and reciprocal accountability between management and academics, as a ‘culture of getting by’ in which academics strive to cope with confusing and shifting demands and, finally, as a system that places ‘constraints on team work’. Such less positive, if not negative, perceptions of the quality system and the associated challenges increased the encroachment on, intrusion into and accountability of frontline academics, which often leads them to experience scepticism and resistance. The management of higher education

institutions and external quality monitoring bodies tend to view quality and quality assurance more positively than academics (Newton, 2002).

An external quality evaluation is seen as an externally imposed instrument used for surveilling, governing, controlling, and regulating the work of the academic staff (Barrow, 1999). Quality assurance is argued to encroach on the autonomy and integrity of the academic profession. In his analysis of the spread of managerialism and its consequences for the academic profession in England, Trow (1993, 1994) argues that the formal and explicit mechanisms of quality assessment imposed externally on academics seek to promote better performance by emphasising external incentives, such as promotions and salary increments, over intrinsic motivation, which contributes to the deprofessionalisation of the academic profession. Quality evaluations are hence seen as an instrument that deprofessionalises academics, and such processes of deprofessionalisation are considered the natural consequences of the government withdrawing their trust in higher education institutions and academics. Similarly, Cheng (2012, p. 785) also reiterates that an increased intensity of quality evaluation requirements may foster, among academic staff, a feeling that their professionalism, to some extent, is being attacked.

Explicit evaluations of higher education, often those initiated by governments, may lead to the loss of privacy in higher education institutions and academic work (Kogan, 1990). Quality monitoring procedures can be invasive in their arrangements, thereby dominated by orientations that fundamentally encroach and impinge on academics (Newton, 2002).

External quality assurance tends to have a constraining effect on higher education institutions. There is an inherent tension between the orientations towards conformity and diversity within quality assurance (Billing, 2004), as external pressures tend to oblige higher education institutions to increasingly conform to the expectations and requirements of the external evaluation. Thus, this challenges the efforts that have been targeted at promoting diversity in institutions' approaches to quality assurance. In criticising the rigidity of external quality assurance systems, particularly the standardised approach often adopted at national levels, Genis (2002) states the potential value of incorporating elements of flexibility in such systems. This is important, since it would not be reasonable and effective to approach all higher education institutions, which are at different stages of progress towards developing quality assurance, from the same point in the accountability-improvement continuum.

Connected to these constraining pressures of accountability are the problems with the methods and criteria adopted in the external quality evaluations that are dominated by compliance requirements. A major issue in this regard is related to the fact that the standards against which quality is assessed in external evaluations are often ‘producer-determined’, which means that they are defined by governments and quality assurance agencies rather than students and academic staff (Harvey, 2002, p. 252). It is important, in such cases, to note the differences in terms of power, knowledge and meanings between those who design the quality assurance systems (often with a strong orientation towards accountability) and the academics working at the higher education institutions, who usually are not adequately consulted but are at the frontline of the implementation of these systems (Houston & Paewai, 2013). In some case, the formulation of the methods employed in external evaluations lacks an initial elaborate clarification and understanding of the meaning of quality in the context of higher education (Harvey, 1998).

Significantly resonating with the main arguments presented above, Baldwin (1997, pp. 59-61) concludes that, apart from the evident positive impacts of quality assessment, such as the establishment of rigorous evaluation procedures, growing attention towards quality and the increased participation of stakeholders in quality evaluation, external and internal quality assurance processes may, on the negative side, lead to excessive bureaucratisation, increased administrative workload and an emphasis on formalism. This may constrain creativity and exacerbate the deprofessionalisation of academics, as the ‘policing mentality’ aspect of the quality assurance systems may accentuate their perception as more of a ‘watchdog’ and ‘enforcer’, which is caused by an increasing tendency of distrusting the academic staff. Moreover, compliance- and accountability-oriented external quality assurance systems are argued to have a fundamentally rigid, homeostatic and over-bureaucratic character that makes them less suitable for proactively responding to the transformations and future demands of higher education (Harvey, 1998, 2002; Yorke, 2000).

Accountability orientation as a pressure leading to ‘gamesmanship’

Several authors indicate that the compulsory, bureaucratic and inquisitive pressure exerted by external quality evaluations breeds a climate of distrust that coerces academics to play the quality game and engage in ‘impression management’ (Newton, 2000, 2002), prompts them to engage in ‘gamesmanship’ (Baty, 1999; Harvey, 2002), encourages ‘artificial exchanges’ and ‘game-playing’ (Harvey & Newton, 2004, p.

163), promotes 'self-selling' and 'strategic games' (Frazer, 1997), engenders 'dramaturgical compliance' (Barrow, 1999), prompts higher education institutions to learn to 'play the system' and manipulate the techniques of passing the tests of quality evaluation (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013, p. 1268), deters academics from undertaking open and honest self-reflection and, instead, draws them towards adopting a 'defensive account' or, at times, overstating their strengths (Harvey, 2002, p. 258), leading to a 'superficial' quality assurance (Genis, 2002, p. 68). The stress caused by the bureaucratic procedures of fulfilling quality assurance requirements may lead to 'window-dressing' activities in higher education institutions (Van Damme, 2002, p. 16). In his study, Hoecht (2006, p. 556) reported that academics tend to be cynical and hardly believe in quality assurance and, in some circumstances, would be 'tempted to trick it'. External quality evaluations can produce some unintended side-effects, such as 'behavioural costs', such that higher education institutions may tend to engage in 'game playing' and orchestration (Leeuw, 2002, p. 145). Compulsory and judgemental external quality evaluations encourage higher education institutions to increasingly attempt to present themselves in the best positive light possible, thereby embracing compliance in a superficial manner. This is particularly true if the outcomes of such evaluations are tied to funding, ranking and other forms of sanctions (Harvey, 1998; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Such tendencies to manipulate the system may become prevalent and sophisticated when evaluations are run for a longer period, thus providing enough time to frustrated academics to work their way around the evaluation (Genis, 2002; Harvey, 1998, 2002; Newton, 2000, 20002).

In these cases, the pressure to comply with standards can distort the fundamental objective of the self-evaluation, in that, rather than engaging in an honest and critical self-reflection, higher education institutions may tend to strive to present themselves to external bodies in the best and most favourable manner as possible (Frazer, 1997). For instance, Genis (2002) observed in her analysis of the development of quality assurance in South Africa that technikons began learning, over two cycles of external reviews, how to prepare for these reviews and create a positive impression by employing the best methods of presenting data and responding to peer reviewers during site visits. Another example is the dramaturgical compliance that Barrow (1999) identifies in the external quality evaluation of Polytechnics in New Zealand, wherein the pressure of a regulative environment encourages the staff to act or perform the roles assigned to them in a manner that accords with the expectations and rules of the evaluation. An additional example of such practices can be found in the work of Harvey (2002), which claims that the audit processes for quality at many higher education institutions in the UK are 'heavily orchestrated'. They are said to

involve instances where these institutions present a formal rather than a practical account of their organisational practices, and groups of staff are briefed and debriefed by the senior management before and after they are questioned by a team of experts, auditors and peers. Such tendencies of game-playing entail the withholding of the weaknesses and other aspects of institutional practice that could potentially taint the impression systematically presented to external evaluators. It breeds a lack of honesty and facilitates engagement in the quality game (Harvey, 1998, 2002).

Insights from the agency theory inform that the opportunistic behaviour exhibited by higher education institutions may include the distorting of information, in which academic and administrative units intentionally engage in providing wrong, misleading or untruthful information to governments and agencies with regard to their performance (Kivistö, 2007). Such theoretical perspectives provide insights into how some higher education institutions may tend to polish, fabricate or overstate their performance to try to portray themselves as lawful, quality and thriving institutions in the eyes of external quality assurance agencies, governments and the public.

Quality evaluation systems of this nature promote a culture of compliance rather than a genuine improvement in teaching and learning. Game-playing and the manipulation of impressions can undermine the development of an atmosphere that is conducive for the staff to engage in genuine critical self-reflection (Rippin et al., 1994). Quality systems with an overly hierarchical management structure and style constrain continuous improvements and the overall development of a robust quality culture (Rippin et al., 1994).

Quest for an improvement orientation

An interesting paradox within the quality agenda indicates that the development of a quality culture and the progress in achieving continuous quality improvement have lagged behind in spite of the existence of decades of discourse on the nature of quality and the experiences of implementing quality assurance (Yorke, 2000). Connected to this are several cases of significant mismatches between the stated intentions of national evaluation schemes and the procedures they often employ to achieve them in practice (Kells, 1999). The argument suggests that, although quality improvement is often a priority in the agenda of the stated intentions, the actual procedures employed in external evaluations, such as peer reviews, performance indicators and reporting, usually focus on ensuring accountability, control and compliance, and quality improvement is rarely prioritised. This highlights the

inadequacy of the efforts exerted for demonstrating the impacts of external evaluations on institutions and supporting the processes of self-evaluation and commitment to quality improvement at higher education institutions.

The dominant trend that was identified indicates that most quality assurance systems initially focus on establishing credibility fulfilling the accountability requirements, which is followed by the push for enhancing continuous quality improvement and is rarely the other way around (Genis, 2002; Harvey, 1998). In practice, the presumption that accountability results in quality improvement is debateable.

The notion that quality evaluation systems must address and adopt quality improvements as an integral component of their mission is growing substantially (Harvey, 1998). This is because the accountability and compliance orientation of external quality assurance may not be sufficient for yielding lasting improvements in quality on its own. It needs to work in synergy with the internal quality improvement processes of higher education institutions. This highlights the need to improve the use of external evaluations for enhancing developments in the academic performance of higher education institutions rather than overemphasising control (Kogan, 1990).

Most quality assurance agencies tend to operate with the fitness for purpose notion of quality, which is a relatively simplistic and convenient approach and rarely considers quality as transformation (Harvey, 1998, 2002). Such an approach is typically dominated by a compliance-oriented evaluation that, being largely burdensome in nature for higher education institutions, is considered to hamper the impacts of the external evaluation on quality improvements. Such tendencies, asserts Harvey, result in a preoccupation with the assessments of standards and methods rather than the substances of transformations with respect to teaching and learning. Quality evaluations, in certain cases, are criticised for their excessive focus on checking the written policies, documents and activities that are primarily associated with administration. As a result, they place insufficient emphasis on appraising the practices that are employed by the academics to assure the quality of teaching and learning (Dill, 1998). The experience, progress and transformation of student learning are thus often inadequately assessed. Quality improvement practically becomes secondary to compliance with predefined standards (Harvey, 1998). The discussion presented by Harvey (1998) suggests that adopting the notion of considering quality as transformation becomes crucial if the primary goal of quality assurance is to be the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education

institutions. This is particularly important to more directly address improvements in the nature, content and substance of student learning and innovations in teaching.

An increasing amount of emphasis is placed on the need for developing a robust quality culture in higher education institutions as, for instance, Ehlers (2009) argues that only accreditation and other quality assessment procedures are insufficient. The essence of the argument calls for moving away from the emphasis on regulations for promoting quality culture. Thus, the quality culture is seen to offset the limitations of the quality regulation mechanisms. Consistent with this argument, Lomas (1999) underscores the role of organisational culture in quality management. The argument posits the importance of taking organisational culture into account, since the capacity of the existing common standards and rigid quality management mechanisms used for sufficiently assessing the differences in the organisational culture, mission and vision, size and diverse nature of higher education institutions and other features that are unique to each institution is questionable.

Quality assurance systems need to increasingly focus on enhancement rather than on ensuring compliance if higher education institutions are to utilise such practices as an instrument to improve the quality of their operations (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013). The growing desire for embracing improvement orientation, rather than accountability, as the dominant point of departure for external quality evaluation in the long run is evident in the scholarly discussions on this topic. This thereby provides more opportunities for self-regulation and constructive dialogue between external quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. Such shifts in the points of departure of external evaluations can enable higher education institutions to assume ownership of and responsibilities for continuously improving their quality and institutionalising the practice of self-evaluation.

In most cases, overemphasising the accountability purpose of external quality assurance is not desirable. As far as higher education institutions are concerned, there is a growing demand for the primary objective of external quality assurance to address the task of supporting improvements in teaching and learning and for the other purposes and requirements to be considered secondary. There is a clear preference for internal systems of quality evaluation, particularly when considering the inherent momentum for facilitating quality improvements in teaching and learning at the institutional level (Harvey, 2002). The self-regulation of higher education institutions is preferred over strict state regulation. As such, it has also been argued that 'the less threatening the evaluation process the more open, honestly reflective and useful is the self-evaluation process' (Harvey, 2002, p. 257). In practice, the granting of more autonomy in terms of self-regulation requires higher education

institutions to establish a functioning and effective system for internal quality assurance (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

Accordingly, a recent shift in tendencies has been observed within quality assurance in higher education, which places an increasing emphasis on organisational change than quality control, on quality development than quality assurance and on innovation than compliance with standards and criteria³⁴ (Ehlers, 2009). Other authors have also indicated the growing demand for quality enhancement in higher education (e.g. Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Colling & Harvey, 1995; Lomas, 2004; Yorke, 1996). Reinforcing these tendencies, Singh (2010) argues in favour of a quality assurance system with less accountability, fewer rigid evaluation instruments and more reflexivity for supporting academic functions. For instance, one method of motivating higher education institutions would be to reward effective quality improvement and self-regulation efforts with, for example, greater self-determination and longer intervals between compulsory external evaluations (Genis, 2002). The desire is to have quality assurance systems that impact the broader transformative social goals instead of merely serving accountability requirements.

The essence of improvement orientation

The improvement purpose of external quality assurance is essentially concerned with supporting higher education institutions with improving the quality and standards of their inputs, processes and outputs (Kettunen, 2012; Lemaitre, 2002). The function of an external quality evaluation, for which quality improvement is the primary objective, involves focusing on analysing strengths and weaknesses and identifying the actions that need to be taken for improvement (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). External quality assurance is expected to motivate and support institutions in developing internal mechanisms of quality monitoring.

³⁴ There are some exceptions to the scholarly discussion regarding the extent to which such directions of transformations are desirable. Interestingly, for instance, Filippakou and Tapper (2008) criticise the transition in quality regimes that implies a shift from quality assurance to quality enhancement, taking place in England in the 1990s. The authors argue that the quality agenda is strongly determined by political interpretation and power struggles and involves pressure groups, politics and academic interests. The move away from a tighter quality assurance is argued to be the consequence of such negotiations and pressure politics in favour of a softer form of quality evaluation procedures such as institutional audits. The authors seem to maintain the view that such constraints in the political and contextual nature of the systems are likely to create difficulties in shaping the quality agenda in a manner that initiates radical changes.

An external quality assurance oriented towards facilitating improvement employs a standardised and transparent methodology for evaluation, involves higher education institutions in the designing of the quality evaluation system, places more importance on self-assessment, carries out careful documentation³⁵ of the relevant evidence, appoints a team of external experts who conduct themselves with loyalty and professionalism³⁶, includes students and other stakeholders in the evaluation process, offers constructive recommendations to the higher education institution under review, publishes a publicly accessible report on the outcomes of the evaluation, gives an opportunity to the reviewed higher education institution to discuss the outcomes of the evaluation before the report is published, assigns the main responsibility for implementing recommendations and following-up on development works to the higher education institution and does not explicitly link the outcomes of the evaluation with funding and ranking practices (Thune, 1997, pp. 95-100).

Another contribution of an external quality evaluation is the information it produces, which is crucial for the development of higher education at the system and institutional levels. Quality assurance generates vital information for assessing the current status of a higher education institution and informing the nature of the development work that the institution has to undertake for continuously improving the quality of its core operations and performance to realise its missions. Quality evaluations seek to contribute to the improvement of educational inputs, processes and outputs (Singh, 2010). Such quality evaluation procedures provide data that inform managers about the extent of the effectiveness of institutional quality assurance procedures. Quality assurance also generates comparative information regarding performances across higher education institutions and standards of study programmes, which is useful for identifying areas that need development and for detecting and sharing good practices. On the other hand, although its scale is insufficient in most cases, external quality evaluations involve students, academic staff, management staff and external stakeholders in their process. This vastly contributes to the cultivation of a critical mass of key actors at the grassroots level and the building up of institutional capacity that supports the development of internal quality assurance systems.

³⁵ The practice of documentation entails recording evidence consistently and comprehensively in order to support the judgement and outcome of quality evaluations.

³⁶ Peer reviewers are expected to balance their examining role with professionalism, collegialism and mutual trust (Thune, 1997).

Quality assurance can bring about multi-dimensional impacts on higher education institutions. For instance, Dill (2000, p. 203), in his study of academic audit systems in Europe and Asia, highlights the positive impact of academic audits on catalysing and enhancing, for instance, capacity-building in quality assurance systems, institutional leadership, teaching and student learning, clarification of responsibilities for quality improvement, cooperation and discussion among units, dissemination of information on challenges and good practices, and demonstration of public accountability at higher education institutions.

Finding a middle ground between the accountability and improvement orientations

In summary, it is possible to identify three trends from the analysis of the literature that discusses the accountability-improvement continuum. First, external quality assurance currently tends to overemphasise the fulfilment of accountability requirements. Second, there is a growing interest towards quality improvement, rather than accountability, and an increasing demand for external quality evaluation to support continuous quality improvements at higher education institutions. Third, the settling point between these two contrasting trends seems to be the call for striking a balance between the accountability and improvement purposes within external evaluations, as both are integral components of the concerns and agenda with respect to quality in higher education. It is also impossible to serve the accountability function without external quality assessments and achieve quality improvement without self-evaluation (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

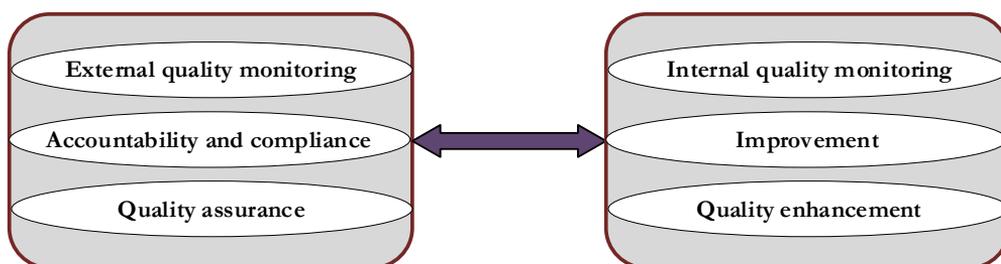
Using the metaphor of ‘Scylla’ and ‘Charybdis’, Vroeijenstijn (1995) stresses the importance of navigating and striking a balance between the accountability and improvement purposes of external quality assurance, since focusing only on either one would make external evaluations incomplete and create a situation where internal and external stakeholders demand that the other one be addressed. Focusing too much on accountability may constrain the momentum towards and flexibility in responding to quality improvement demands (e.g. Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Newton, 2002; Rippin et al., 1994), while overemphasising improvement may lead to stakeholders demanding the fulfilment of accountability requirements. This underscores the risks associated with embracing either of these extremes and the advantages of developing a practical approach that, within itself, satisfies both accountability and improvement purposes. The task of balancing the accountability

and quality improvement aims of quality assurance is likely to remain a concern in the future quality agenda for higher education (Singh, 2010).

The practical circumstances of a national higher education system may influence the balance between the accountability and improvement orientations of quality assurance. For example, an accountability purpose may become more important in larger higher education systems where there is an expansion of mostly unregulated private higher education sector, or where new forms of institutions, programmes or qualifications are introduced. In contrast, higher education systems that are smaller and mainly consist of highly mature higher education institutions that use more effective mechanisms of internal quality assurance may tend to lean in favour of a more pronounced improvement orientation (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002).

An ideal model would incorporate an optimal composition of both the accountability and improvement functions (Danø & Stensaker, 2007). It has been acknowledged that certain measures of accountability frameworks and requirements of compliance are required to regulate the standards of education and training provided at higher education institutions. It has also been highlighted that external quality assurance could be more impactful if it provides greater flexibility and autonomy for institutional self-regulation, therefore motivating higher education institutions to deliver high-quality educational services (Genis, 2002). Harvey (2002) suggests that external quality assurance agencies tend to pay more attention to quality improvement as they mature.

Figure 1. The tension between external and internal quality monitoring



As summarised in the diagram above, the analysis of the literature implies that the concept of accountability is often associated with quality assurance, whereas improvement is associated with quality enhancement. By the same logic, external quality monitoring is fundamentally associated with accountability and quality assurance, while internal quality monitoring is predominantly seen from the point of view of improvement and quality enhancement. In the table below, the contrast

between external and internal quality assurance practices has been summarised based on the analysis of the main points extracted from the discussion in the literature.

Table 1. Summary of the comparison between external and internal quality assurance

Points of comparison	External quality assurance	Internal quality assurance
Initiation and ownership	Fundamentally external to higher education institutions, evaluation conducted by an external agency or body, mostly initiated by governments or associations of institutions	Internal processes within higher education institutions, quality monitoring of own performance
Primary purpose and objective	Ensuring accountability and compliance	Supporting quality improvement
Main actors	Quality assurance agencies, teams of experts and peers	Internal stakeholders within a higher education institution such as teachers, students, management, other support staff
Main activities and processes	Ensuring standards of education, efficiency and effectiveness in resource utilisation, assuring value for money, ensuring compliance with goals of external stakeholders (i.e. government, fund providers, employers, society), safeguarding and protecting the interests of stakeholders, controlling and regulating	Entrenching the culture of continuous quality improvement, improving quality of teaching and learning, research, and societal engagement, monitoring progress towards strategic mission and goals, enhancing student learning, supporting decision-making and planning procedures, improving graduate employability
Procedures, criteria and goals	Determined by an external authority	Set by the higher education institution itself
Method and instruments	Accreditation, audit, external review, peer-review, site visits, performance or statistical indicators, external validation, providing recommendations, publication of reports	Self-evaluation, self-assessment, feedback systems, surveys, performance evaluation, institutional overhaul and reforms
Mode of assessment	Summative, retrospective, judgement based on past performance	Formative, prospective, deals with current and future quality of performance
Frequency	One-off, conducted in rounds with years of intervals	Continuous, cyclical
Implications for institutional autonomy	Exercises authority through an external body, bureaucratic, constrains institutional autonomy	Promotes institutional autonomy, safeguards academic freedom, institutional innovativeness

(Source: Compiled by the author from a review of relevant literature)

It is vital to understand that the relationship between external quality evaluations and the resulting quality improvements in higher education institutions is more complex than a direct, simplistic and immediate association. The impacts of an external evaluation on quality improvement are not always drastic; in fact, its impacts on changing the ways of thinking about quality, making the issue of quality part of the agenda, promoting the debate on quality and entrenching a quality culture in higher education institutions requires an extended period of time. Thus, it gradually induces tangible quality improvements (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The implementation of the recommendations received from an external review gradually gear higher education institutions towards making a series of internal adjustments, the effects of which take time to reflect as improvements in the quality of education, student learning and research.

The value and success of external quality assurance mechanisms are assessed in terms of their extent of impact and the follow up on quality improvements in teaching and learning at higher education institutions. For an external quality assurance to be effective, it needs to be linked to continuous procedures of internal quality improvement (Thune, 1997). This also requires external quality evaluations to be comprehensive, impartial, consistent, credible, exercise authority and work in synergy with institutional quality improvement efforts based on the principles of mutual understanding, commitment and trust (Thune, 1997). On the other hand, higher education institutions need to effectively shoulder the prime responsibility of implementing the external recommendations and monitoring follow up developments. A lasting improvement in quality, hence, only takes place when quality assurance is supported with internally driven processes (Harvey, 1998). Quality assurance principles need to be adequately internalised at the institutional level if quality assurance is to be effective (Baldwin, 1997).

Another aspect worth emphasising is the need to engage and solicit the commitment of the academic and support staff for internal quality assessment initiatives and processes to have legitimacy, succeed in becoming institutionalised and produce meaningful results (Rippin et al., 1994). This underscores the importance of respecting the autonomy and integrity of the academic profession when undertaking external and internal quality assessments. Actively consulting stakeholders in the process of designing and implementing a quality assurance system is vital for the effectiveness of the efforts exerted for monitoring and improving quality in higher education.

It is crucial, as Newton (2000) emphasises, to put more efforts into understanding how academics perceive, respond to, adapt, reshape or resist and attach meanings to

policies and initiatives associated with quality assurance and monitoring. External quality evaluating bodies and higher education institutions need to take into account the specific nature and organisation of the academic work if the quality policies and programmes are to be effectively implemented and if the academic community, as the primary actor, is to play a pivotal role in such processes. Otherwise, being subjected to external quality assurance and monitoring evaluations and conducting internal assessments would become merely ritualistic activities that serve a metaphoric purpose of ‘feeding the beast’ (Newton, 2000). Conversely, an effective quality assurance can serve as a useful mechanism for restoring public trust in higher education and higher education institutions beyond supporting a lasting improvement in quality for higher education institutions (Elassy, 2015).

3.6 Conclusion

The discussion presented in this chapter provides the conceptual and theoretical foundations for the theoretical and empirical framework employed in this study for analysing the implications that the overall level of trust placed by a quality assurance agency in higher education institutions may have for the nature of quality management models. Quality assurance in higher education serves the contrasting but interrelated needs of ensuring accountability and supporting quality enhancement. As such, external and internal quality assurance could be more generally associated with such slightly contrasting concerns. Further, demands for accountability are mainly addressed through external quality evaluations, which tend to be directed towards determining whether the education and research provided at higher education institutions meet acceptable standards, ensuring accountability with respect to the demands of internal and external stakeholders and safeguarding the wellbeing of society. In contrast, the quality enhancement needs are served through the internal procedures, practices and processes that aim to improve the quality of the core institutional activities and student learning through the active engagement of academic and administrative staff and students.

The present study identifies the relative consistency between such distinct underlying concerns and the core purposes of accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models. Accordingly, an accountability-oriented quality management model is considered to be driven by the need to ensure compliance and accountability with regard to the quality standards and expectations of stakeholders. In such cases, quality assurance can be considered an integral

component of the broader accountability instruments that are applied in the governance of higher education. On the other hand, the driving force behind an enhancement-led quality management model tends to emanate from the desire to support continuous quality improvements in higher education institutions.

Further, the quality management models may originate from (among other sources) or imply disparate foundations for the trust between the stakeholders involved in quality assurance processes. It is argued that the preference for accountability-oriented quality management may be partially linked to weaker foundations for the trust in the internal quality monitoring mechanisms of institutions, whereas the reliance on enhancement-led quality management may require the presence of stronger and more stable foundations for the trust placed in higher education institutions and that shared amongst key stakeholders. This is further highlighted by the trend that accountability-oriented quality management involves the use of control, regulation and incentive mechanisms. Cases where enhancement-led quality management is predominant may result in a greater reliance on institutional values, commitment, capacity and autonomy.

The accountability and improvement orientations are also considered to be linked to the rationale behind the advent of formal quality assurance requirements in higher education and the broader transformations in the governance of higher education. Quality assurance is thus inextricably associated with the changing landscape of the relationship between higher education institutions and governments and other external stakeholders.

4 TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how the changing relationship between higher education institutions and the state has resulted in a growing emphasis on trust and accountability issues. A study of the trust between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies and its implications for the quality management models requires an understanding of the broader trust and accountability issues that are present in the policy and governance of higher education.

The chapter first explores the essence of trust and accountability in the context of government-university relationship and the peculiar forms of interplay between the two concepts. It gives an overview of different accountability types observed in higher education. The section also argues the need to balance trust and accountability, since neither are deemed sufficient. The chapter then discusses why trust is an important issue in higher education and quality assurance. It then outlines the trends of declining trust and growing accountability demands in higher education. It gives due emphasis to identifying the competing views forwarded by various researchers on the causes of the trust 'crisis' in higher education. The discussion also extends to describing the roles that quality assurance and management in higher education institutions play in restoring public trust. This is followed by the analysis of quality assurance agencies as intermediaries between governments and higher education institutions, which enables perceiving the relationship between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies as part of the broader government-university relationship. Next, the chapter presents a review of the application of trust in higher education studies. Last, it concludes by highlighting the relevance of the key points of the chapter to the guiding research questions of the study.

4.1 Trust and accountability in government-university relationship

The issues of trust and accountability constitute a key component of government-university relationship, which is useful for understanding trust issues between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. The sections below provide an overview of the essence of trust and accountability, types of accountability employed in higher education and the shows the need to balance trust and accountability as neither sufficiently accommodates the interests of both higher education institutions and governments. The discussion is expected to provide an insight into the changing relationship between governments and higher education institutions, such that the trend in most higher education systems relates to a gradual shift to a more supervisory role of governments and the subsequent consequences of an increasing autonomy accompanied with growing demands for accountability at higher education institutions.

4.1.1 The essence of trust and accountability

There are various perspectives of understanding the interplay between trust and accountability. In the context of the link between higher education institutions and society, Trow (1996, p. 310) defines trust as ‘the provision of support, by either public or private bodies, without the requirement that the institution either provide specific goods and services in return for that support or account specifically and in detail for the use of those funds’. Trust implies a confidence in the intentions and competence of higher education institutions to function responsibly without the need for external instruments of monitoring and regulation. The more higher education institutions are trusted by stakeholders, the less demand for employing strict control mechanisms (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009)³⁷. Despite the existence of diverse views on the relationship between trust and control, trust is often considered to be a substitute for control (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003; Costa, 2003)³⁸. Trust also

³⁷ Literature also shows that increased demand for trust may not necessarily mean lesser needs for control (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003), particularly in circumstances where risks to a violation of trust is perceived to be likely and may cause substantial damages (Costa, 2003; Morris & Moberg, 1994).

³⁸ Some studies suggest that trust and control can be positively related (e.g. Bijlsma-Frankema, 2000; Bijlsma-Frankema & Van De Bunt, 2002) and complementary (Bijlsma & Van De Bunt, 2003; Das & Teng, 1998; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). Evidence from such studies challenges the widely held

entails governments to voluntarily assume the risks that may arise from relinquishing oversight. Governments' trust in universities is manifested in tendencies of reducing discretionary powers over higher education institutions, granting greater institutional autonomy, decentralising authority to higher education institutions and voluntary relinquishing of power to universities through providing endowments, formula funding (involving the provision of multi-year grants and block grants) and use of government agencies that may insulate higher education institutions from central government policies (Trow, 1996). The existence of trust tends to make accountability unnecessary or superfluous (Zalec, 2013). Trust involves reliance on institutions and systems and enables interactions to take place more efficiently with low transaction cost (De Boer, 2002). Governments' trust in universities can be institutionalised or deinstitutionalised through funding mechanisms and law (Trow, 1996).

The literature indicates various interpretations of trust discussed by several researchers. For instance, De Boer (2002, p. 66) identifies three notions of trust: calculative or instrumental, norm-based and cognitive-based or expectations-based. Calculative or instrumental trust entails relying on a rational-choice approach based on analysing the specific costs and benefits involved in a given interaction (Li et al., 2012). In contrast, norm-based trust places greater emphasis on moral aspects, where trust develops based on shared values and norms and enables collective actions. Additionally, trust can be based on cognition and expectations about social order and actors involved in specific interactions (Li et al., 2012). In addition to these types, trust may have personality-based and institution-based foundations (McKnight et al., 1998). Trust can also be understood in terms of deterrence-based and knowledge-based elements (Adobor, 2006). The significance of character-based and competence-based trust has been noted (Gabarro, 1987; Li et al., 2012).

In contrast, accountability involves an obligation to provide explanation, pose questions, request clarifications and justifications, pass judgements and imposing consequences (Bovens, 2007; Zumeta, 2011). In the context of government-university relationship, accountability measures may include such as legislative regulations, financial monitoring, performance evaluations and reporting requirements, academic regulation, quality audit and accreditation requirements, and other types of explicit and implicit external supervision (Kivistö, 2007; Trow, 1996). The essence of trust and accountability thus could be seen as contradictory to each

notions of trust and control as opposite constructs. In such cases, it is theorised that a combination of trust and control serve to achieve a desired level of cooperation and promote team performance (Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2008) in a given relationship between actors.

other. In simplistic terms, if one trusts another, there would be less needs to control and force the other to be accountable. In such cases, trust may be considered an ‘antithesis of accountability’ (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011b, p. 11). Accountability instruments would not be needed where trust exists. The need for ensuring accountability rises in situations where there is low level of trust between parties or where an existing level of trust is deemed insufficient. This is consistent with a view that ‘[a]ccountability and cynicism about human behaviour go hand in hand’ (Trow, 1996, p. 311). In such cases, accountability instruments may be needed to safeguard an actor against potentially harmful intentions and behaviour of another, and in order to ensure that its expectations are fulfilled by the other. Such patterns of argumentation perceive trust and accountability as opposite and paradoxical notions, where an increase in one would mean a decrease in the other (Trow, 1996; Zalec, 2013).

Beyond such simplistic conceptions, a more complex interplay between trust and accountability can be found in the literature. For instance, some tend to consider trust, quality and instrumentality as key interrelated dimensions for analysing the concept of accountability in higher education (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011a). This implies that the concepts of trust and quality may be understood as components that form the conceptual foundations of accountability in the context of higher education. Such views enable the considerations of complementary and conflicting relationships between accountability and trust. It has been argued that accountability processes could either ‘lead to a virtuous circle of trust enhancement’ or ‘varying degrees of compliance, resistance and subterfuge that produce a vicious circle which undermines trust’ (Massy, 2011, p. 232). Accountability is, hence, understood in terms of trust (Massy, 2011; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011b). On one hand, it is possible to argue that accountability serves to enhance trustworthiness and incentivises the development of trustful attitude (e.g. Stensaker & Harvey, 2011b; Sztompka, 1999). The literature indicates that power and control, employed at an optimal level, can facilitate the creation of trust (Bachmann, 2001; Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Such views highlight that trustworthiness could be stimulated through the application of monitoring and sanctioning instruments that are designed to discourage a breach of trust (Sztompka, 1999). However, at the root of such views seems to be the lack of trust, such that accountability is needed to oblige an actor, who under normal circumstances may not be trusted to behave in a trustworthy manner, and provide an insurance against potential untrustworthy activities. In contrast, accountability can also be seen as a ‘double-edged sword’ (Trow, 1996, p. 311), since, for instance in the context of

higher education, it may enable to ensure that higher education institutions are obliged to function responsibly and in the best interest of internal and external stakeholders. However, doing so may harm their institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Trow, 1996). Such complexities suggest a peculiar interplay between accountability and trust, such that it involves ‘tension’, ‘mutually supportive’ approach and the two being ‘at odds’ depending on the circumstances (Trow, 1996, p. 317).

4.1.2 Types of accountability in higher education

Government-university relationship may concern various aspects of accountability. For instance, Trow (1996, p. 316) draws distinction between academic, legal and financial accountabilities. Legal and financial accountability concerns the obligation of higher education institutions for a responsible resource utilisation and lawful functioning, served, for instance, through internal and external auditing practices. Government requires higher education institutions to be accountable, such that they are obliged to provide explanation, make a report on activities and resource utilisation, provide answer and clarification to questions or justify (Trow, 1996). Academic accountability focuses on the scholarly and moral responsibility of higher education institutions to inform internal and external stakeholders how resources are used to support core missions such as teaching, research and community engagement. Accountability on the quality of academic functions is served using instruments of accreditation and quality audits, despite concerns over the extent to which these assessments encourage critical self-examination that derive institutional quality improvements (Trow, 1996, p. 316). Such distortions and asymmetries in information may give higher education institutions certain power over governments that may be deployed strategically (De Boer, 2002). Governments are interested in ensuring that higher education institutions carry out their core missions to quality standards, utilise resources responsibly, and function in ways that respond to pressing needs of society and play key roles in overall societal development. Additionally, governments are concerned with the quality and employability of graduates from higher education institutions (Westerheijden, 1990; Yorke, 2002). Evaluating academic accountability could be challenging, in comparison to legal and financial accountability, due to complexities and ambiguities in concretely measuring the outcomes of teaching and research (Trow, 1996).

There is a tendency to perceive quality assurance more than an issue pertaining only to internal institutional needs and as an integral component of a changing relationship between governments and higher education institutions (Girma, 2014; Vroeijsenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Quality assurance requirements on higher education institutions such as accreditation and external review can be seen as components of broader accountability instruments put in place by governments and implemented through agencies of state or other regulatory bodies established independent of government funding and monitoring (Harvey, 2002). Quality assurance as an accountability tool works in combination with other external mechanisms such as the exercise of government regulation through funding and law, and market forces (Trow, 1996).

Moreover, accountability may have managerial, political/bureaucratic and professional aspects (Hansen et al., 2019, pp. 559-560). It is posited that political/bureaucratic accountability is mainly employed by government ministries and agencies to regulate the alignment of mission and goals, regulate delegation of tasks, monitor allocation of resources and oblige provision of information at higher education institutions. Managerial accountability is utilised by managers to monitor institutional outputs, performance, effectiveness and competitiveness. Unlike the political/bureaucratic and managerial accountabilities of hierarchical nature, professional accountability entails the obligations of academics to peers and adhere to professional principles of conduct (Zumeta, 2011). Such accountability forms may assist in ensuring the alignment of higher education institutions with political agendas, institutional strategic objectives and professional norms. Additionally, Erkkilä (2007, pp. 8-24) also identifies, through a review of literature, six types of accountability such as political accountability, bureaucratic accountability, personal accountability, professional accountability, performance, and deliberation. Similarly, King (2015) indicates that the accountability regimes in higher education may involve market, state and professional forms. The literature highlights that there can be several types of accountability based on the dimensions of the nature of the forum, actor, conduct, and obligation involved in a given social relation (Bovens, 2007).

Higher education institutions may be broadly required to fulfil external and internal accountability (Trow, 1996, pp. 315-316). External accountability entails the obligation higher education institutions have to assure external stakeholders, funders and providers of various types of support and society a responsible use of resources and engagement with core missions according to expectations and acceptable standards. This is concerned with ensuring the legitimacy of higher education institutions and justifying grounds for continued support from external stakeholders.

The requirements of external accountability involve the appointment of external representatives in the governance boards of higher education institutions (Salmi et al., 2017). The literature suggests that an increase in political trust for higher education has led to the demand of governments, for instance in Finland, for more direct social and public accountability to encourage the commitment of institutional leadership to ensuring economic efficiency and relevance of higher education to societal needs (Hölttä, 1988). The understanding of internal accountability, in contrast, concerns the responsibility that internal constituents of higher education institutions have for each other and their obligations for engaging in internal inquiry of operations to support improvements in standards of activities.

However, accountability requirements may take different formats when implemented to address various aspects of university functions such as finances, quality of education, employability of graduates, research outputs and societal impact (Salmi et al., 2017). Generally, there can be contextual differences in terms of the specific nature of accountability, methods employed for achieving it and implications it bears to institutional practices (Erkkilä, 2007).

4.1.3 Neither trust nor accountability is sufficient

Despite trust being essential for the proper functioning of higher education institutions (Vidovich & Currie, 2011; Zalec, 2013), it is not alone sufficient since it can be exploited and violated unless proper instruments for ensuring some degree of accountability are put in place (Trow, 1996). Trust has its own shortcomings although it contributes to the development of cooperation, stability and cohesion (De Boer, 2002). Trust can be abused (Spier, 2013), violated and damaged (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017), misplaced (Bachmann, 2001; Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Kramer, 1999), may lead to inefficiencies (Mishra, 1996; Zucker, 1986) and formation of 'false organisational unity' (Kujala et al., 2016, p. 701), and can, in some cases, give rise to risks (Bachmann, 2001; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Distrust, suspicion and uncertainty ensues between actors when trust is violated deliberately (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017; Luhmann, 1979). For governments, the choice to rely on trust and abandon regulatory instruments may not be practical, since it leaves governments vulnerable to the opportunistic behaviours of higher education institutions, which, by their nature, are complex and independent entities (Massy, 2011). For instance, Kivistö (2007) identifies various possible manifestations of moral hazard and opportunistic behaviour in higher education institutions. The study

indicates that higher education institutions may engage in shrinking (performing less, or not doing anything, or doing something wrong off-the-record as an expression of opposition towards what is specified by the goals of principals, and this could be associated with the salary and nature of position of individual academics); opportunistic pursuit of prestige (excellence and influence) and revenue through overstating size of budget, student enrolment, programmes, and faculty instead of striving for efficiency; opportunistic cross-subsidisation through employing discretionary resources for purposes other than agreed with the government (the cross-subsidisation could take place between academic functions, administrative and academic functions, and academic functions and infrastructural facilities); and intentionally distorting monitoring information, positively or negatively, for opportunistic purposes (due to performance falling short of expectation, insufficient resources at disposal for task completion, sheer difficulty or besetting nature of tasks, weak monitoring mechanism of governments setting at ease the devious disguise of information at individual and institutional levels) (Kivistö, 2007, pp. 72-88).

The engagement of higher education institutions in such moral hazard and opportunistic behaviour may reduce their productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness. Additionally, governments face the challenges of informational asymmetries and goal conflicts, which together may constitute the aforementioned opportunistic behaviour in higher education institutions (De Boer, 2002; Kivistö, 2007, pp. 50-68). This suggests that a misplaced trust can bring detrimental consequences to the trustor (Hardin, 2002).

For such reasons, trust must not be blind (Trow, 1996). Instead, trust must take into account the trustee's intentions, competence, openness and the risks involved in the interaction (Hardin, 2002; Mishra, 1996). It is argued that '[t]rust cannot be demanded but must be freely given' to those who merit it (Trow, 1996, p. 318). A trustor does not place 'blind trust' (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015, p. 32), nor is trust 'unconditional' (Kovac & Jesenko, 2010, p. 273). The establishment of trust entails a combination of calculative and normative considerations (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). This highlights the conditions that higher education institutions and their academic communities are required to fulfil to earn the trust of the government, external stakeholders and society. In the present study, it is argued that higher education institutions need to prove and demonstrate that they have put in place credible quality assurance systems in order to be trusted by key internal and external stakeholders. Such notions of trust are pervasive in the literature (e.g. Bergan, 2012; Domnica & Talmacean, 2013; Hardin, 2002; Mishra, 1996; Rosa & Amaral, 2012; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Trow, 1996). Higher

education institutions need to justify why they should be considered trustworthy and ‘convince society’ of their commitment to the missions entrusted to them (Rosa & Amaral, 2012, p. 119). An enduring commitment to safeguarding the quality of education, research and community engagement could be crucial for higher education institutions to secure the public’s trust. Further, trust needs to consider other informal accountability settings, such as accountability to professional obligations (integrity to academic community and scientific norms) and personal responsibility (Trow, 1996). Professional accountability can help oblige academics to adhere to professional codes of conduct (Hansen et al., 2019).

Due to problems associated with trust, governments are compelled to employ various governance mechanisms to mitigate the risks of such opportunistic behaviour in higher education institutions. Governments therefore apply a combination of behaviour-based contracts and outcome-based contracts to control such opportunistic behaviour and moral hazard (Kivistö, 2007; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015) or hidden action (De Boer, 2002). Behaviour-based governance provide governments with tools to monitor the opportunistic behaviour of universities in resource utilisation and manners of carrying out tasks through instruments such as a variety of input-based funding (such as line-item budgeting and formula funding) and quality assessment requirements (such as self-evaluation and peer-review) that focus on input and process aspect of university functions (Kivistö, 2007, pp. 90-92). It can be argued that the function of quality assurance agencies and internal quality assurance units primarily relates to behaviour-based governance mechanisms. The requirements for institutional self-evaluation, quality audits and accreditation, reporting obligations, peer review, site visits, recommendation for improvement and follow up constitute the manifestations of behaviour-based governance (Kivistö, 2007; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015, p. 137) in the quality assurance of higher education. They inform governments about the standards of the academic functions of higher education institutions and the mechanisms they employ to assure and improve quality. Accountability concerns underlie the need for a pre-emptive initiative to ensure that higher education institutions are responsibly and adequately serving the interests of the public (Leveille, 2006). This underscores the public interest in the quality and performance of higher education institutions.

On the other hand, output-based governance assist governments in monitoring outputs of the delegated task rather than the input and production process. It is used by governments to regulate possible opportunistic behaviour of universities in pursuing official and operative goals that could conflict with the goals of delegated tasks and mutually agreed set of terms for the entire relationship with governments.

Such governance mechanisms may include performance-based funding, which may use a range of output indicators including employment rate, publication and citation analysis, credits accumulated, number of exams passed, graduation rate and graduation time, number of undergraduate and graduate degrees granted, number of graduate students, research income, number and income from patents and licences, value added, various average cost measures, and other similar indicators (Kivistö, 2007, pp. 93-96). A growing emphasis on outputs characterises the changing relationship between state and higher education institutions (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Enders, 2013). Performance agreements between higher education institutions and ministries are increasingly becoming common accountability tools (Massy, 2011; Salmi et al., 2017; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). Sörlin (2007) identifies a transformation from a traditional 'trust-based funding regime' to an increasingly 'performance-based funding regimes', which brought the growing demands for efficiency, accountability and quality in the changing relationship between states and higher education institutions. Moreover, the growing demands for ensuring managerial and bureaucratic/political accountability may be perceived, for instance by academics, as a sign of government mistrust towards higher education institutions (Hansen et al., 2019).

On the other side of the argument, accountability requirements can weaken institutional autonomy, threaten confidentiality and may act as an 'enemy of effective governance' (Trow, 1996, p. 312), discourage honest exchange of information and truth-telling, threaten autonomy of professionals and may impede diversity and innovation (Jackson, 1998; King, 2015; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Accountability measures may endanger the academic profession (Cheng, 2012; Spier, 2013). There is a concern that, for instance, quality assurance may tend to undermine respect and trust for the expertise of academics (Williams, 2016). This is because formal quality assurance procedures imposed from above or externally can have an unintended consequence of eroding old and informal mechanisms of academic mutual control systems (Van Damme, 2000). The expansion of quality control as an accountability mechanism may tend to be perceived by academics as a threat to their autonomy and professional status. Bureaucratic quality assurance procedures can lead to an imbalance of power and responsibilities such that it increases the power in the hands of external stakeholders and institutional management whereas it decreases those of academics but continues to assign to them more responsibilities for quality monitoring (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). Similarly, Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009) also noted a diminishing power of staff and students amidst the growing role of external stakeholders such as employers, industries and society. Moreover, fulfilling

formal quality assurance requirements may create burden and stress on academic and administrative staff that affect the efficacy and efficiency of resource utilisation in higher education institutions (Dill, 1998; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Van Damme, 2000). For such reasons, a comprehensive understanding of government-university relationship must incorporate an assessment of institutional autonomy, accountability and academic freedom (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018).

Since both trust and accountability alone have their own shortcomings, it becomes key for governments and external stakeholders to formulate a reasonable combination of the two in a manner that fits the realities and contextual needs of a specific higher education system. Ideally, cultivating an ‘intelligent accountability’ (Zalec, 2013, p. 65) could serve needs for both accountability and trust, by concurrently ensuring accountability to external stakeholders and safeguarding the trust in academia and faith in higher education institutions without the need to control each of their internal constituent. This could address the paradox of interests to increase both accountability and trust. Creating a balance between trust and control can accommodate the interests of both higher education institutions and governments (Reed, 2001).

In addition to trust and accountability, other issues may influence the dynamics of relationship between higher education institutions and their external environment. For instance, the combination of accountability, trust and market provide the crucial link between higher education institutions and society (Trow, 1996). The argument posits that accountability requirements enable society to grant funding and other types of support to higher education institutions with constraints and ensure their spending according to certain implicit or explicit criteria. It is argued that accountability can serve as a constraining power, regulatory device and a means to support higher education institutions to improve the standards of their operations (Trow, 1996). Slightly different from accountability, market enables higher education institutions to receive resources from society in exchange for services, i.e. scientific knowledge, research breakthroughs and innovation. The existence of trust, unlike accountability and market, can allow society and external stakeholders to avail necessary resources to higher education institutions along with a degree of autonomy in the internal allocation and utilisation of the resources. Trust thus becomes a key issue in the relationship between higher education institutions and society (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). Trust, for instance, plays a role in financing, such as the reliance of higher education institutions on fund providers and, in turn, the reliance of fund providers on the commitments higher education institutions to provide expected outputs (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

However, trust in a given higher education system may not necessarily represent similar level of trust in a specific higher education institution operating within the system (Bergan, 2012). Although a trustworthy system is made up of trustworthy institutions, a system with few exceptional quality institutions and a majority of insufficient quality institutions may lack trustworthiness. The extent to which quality is uniformly spread across institutions within a higher education system may indicate its level of trustworthiness.

Moreover, Trow (1996) argues that the balance between formal accountability, trust and market determines the nature of relationship higher education institutions have with society. It is posited that accountability mechanisms substitute trust, particularly in contexts where there are weak market forces. Conversely, the existence of robust trust may tend to be related to actively functioning markets, which together may make accountability requirements superfluous. The changing relationship between higher education institutions and state has involved a shift in the balance between the relative importance of state domination and market orientations in the governance and steering of higher education, where the decrease in the former contributed to the increase in importance of the latter (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). In general, the trend of increasing accountability demands of state in exchange for deregulation of higher education institutions, described by Neave (1988) as the rise of the 'Evaluative State', has brought major transformations in the relationship between higher education, state and society.

4.2 Notions on the importance of trust in higher education and quality assurance

Trust is considered by many to be a crucial ingredient for, among other things, the development of a stable social interaction (Cook & Wall, 1980), building working relationships (Gabarro, 1987), developing and maintaining work relationships (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996), enhancing cohesion, stability and cooperation (De Boer, 2012), managing networks and alliances (Limerick & Cunningham, 1993), fostering mutual commitment (Hoech, 2006), enhancing cooperation (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003; Leveille, 2006), supporting mutual exchanges and smooth transaction (Leimeister et al., 2005; Li et al., 2012; Moorman et al., 1993), facilitating information sharing and negotiation (Lander & Kooning, 2013) and communication (Kovac & Jesenko, 2010), preparing strategic planning (Opatz & Hutchinson, 1999), facilitating strategic management processes (Soloducho-Pelc, 2017), facilitating collective

decision and action (Kramer et al., 1996), improving organisational performance (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003; Mishra, 1996), stimulating accountability and team working (Migliore, 2012), facilitating interactions between individuals, organisations, institutions and systems and governing economic and social transactions (Zucker, 1986). Trust also becomes a critical asset for organisations in overcoming periods of crisis and uncertainty (Mishra, 1996; Tyler, 2003) and such as merger (Ruokonen, 2018). Trust facilitates various aspects of organisational processes (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003). Moreover, trust is seen to be a key construct in the understanding of social order (Hardin, 2002) and justice (Brockner & Siegel, 1996; Saunders & Thornhill, 2004; Tyler, 2003). Such traits make trust desirable.

As much as trust is a highly important concept in individual interactions, business organisations, and societal life, it also holds a central place in higher education, higher education institutions and quality assurance systems (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Trow, 1996; Vidovich & Currie, 2011; Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016; Zalec, 2013). In an effort to provide clarity to the discussion, Bergan (2012, p. 53) explains that trust in higher education could more generally mean trust in such as 'an education system, a higher education institution, a study or research programme, a given qualification, the academic community of scholars and students, and an individual teacher, researcher, graduate or student'. Such notions underscore the importance of trust for the proper functioning of higher education institutions and their interactions with stakeholders.

Trust is indispensable if a relationship between higher education institutions and stakeholders is to be a long-lasting and fruitful one. For instance, the study conducted by Perin et al. (2012) indicated that the trust students place on their higher education institution has a positive impact on their commitment and loyalty to the institution. Trust is also a crucial aspect of any quality assurance system and process (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). Hence, the development and maintenance of trust between the key stakeholders of quality management processes is indispensable for an effective functioning and institutionalisation of quality assurance.

The complex organisational and functional nature of higher education institutions makes conducting thoroughly accurate evaluations and monitoring considerably challenging (Kivistö, 2007). In this regard, it is posited that trust has capacity in providing higher education institutions and stakeholders with a means to cope with and manage such over-complexities and uncertainties (Enders, 2013). It is understood that building and maintaining mutual trust could augment efforts of quality control and regulation. Trust could help address aspects of organisational

activity and performance that are uncertain and not directly accessible to external mechanisms in place for ensuring accountability of higher education institutions. Trust, in this regard, could encourage stakeholders to assume risks in relinquishing some degree of control over these complex aspects to the higher education institutions themselves and develop confidence in the intentions, competence, and actions of these institutions for responsibly honouring the positive expectation bestowed in them in return. As Ruokonen (2018, para. 7) fittingly articulated, trust could ‘reduce the need for monitoring and free up resources for more pressing matters’.

It is widely argued that quality assurance contributes to the restoration and consolidation of stakeholders’ trust on higher education and higher education institutions (Elassy, 2015; Huber, 2013; Van Damme, 2002; Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). It is believed that practicing internal quality assurance and undergoing external quality reviews increasingly supports higher education institutions to reassure internal and external stakeholders that systematic procedures of quality management are in place to check whether certain (baseline) standards are being met, thereby contributing to the building of trust in these institutions. On the other side of the argument, it was the perceived decline of public trust in higher education institutions and the subsequent demand for ensuring and increasing accountability among some of the rationales behind introducing formal quality assurance practices in higher education in the first place. For instance, Harvey (1995, p. 29) notes ‘implementation of a quality system carries with it implied criticism of the quality of academics’ work and a lack of trust.’ Similarly, governments needed to introduce more rationalised and formal quality assurance procedures, partly because ‘old quality assurance mechanism [within higher education institutions] are not trusted under the new circumstances’ where higher education has considerably expanded and diversified (Trow, 1996, p. 320).

4.3 Trends of declining trust and growing accountability in higher education

Higher education and the public have a delicate, dynamic and strained relationship (Gibbs, 1998; Leveille, 2006). Despite the controversy as to whether public trust in higher education institutions is high or low, the issue of accountability and trust between these institutions and key stakeholders has undoubtedly become a growing

concern and a topic of frequent discussion³⁹ (Bird, 2013). Such growing intensity of public discourse on trust in higher education may suggest or lead one to assume the existence of substantial trust problems, since there will be less need for trust to develop into an issue in situations where it is well-established (Bergan, 2012). As part of restoring the public trust, higher education institutions need to pay due attention to preparing knowledgeable professionals and ethical citizens, who then go out to conduct researches and serve the public in various positions, thereby influencing and shaping society.

Several authors indicated the trend of growing accountability requirement in the higher education arena (e.g. Barrow, 1999; Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Hansen et al., 2019; Kivistö, 2007; Leveille, 2006; Neave, 1988; Trow, 1996). This suggests an overall trend of a gradual shift in the role of governments from a regulative to a more supervisory character, which resulted in an increased autonomy to higher education institutions and a subsequent demand for more accountability. A recent comparative survey found a trend of increasing institutional autonomy parallel to a growing demand for stringent performance-based funding as an instrument of ensuring political/bureaucratic accountability, increasing demands for social accountability, strengthening managerial accountability, and a growing importance of professional accountability in Nordic countries (Hansen et al., 2019). These studies indicate the continued relevance of such trends in the contemporary landscape of higher education. Higher education institutions are increasingly required to demonstrate their accountability and trustworthiness as the public and stakeholders no longer seem to hold blind trust (Hoech, 2006).

The transformations in the relationship between higher education institutions and governments highlight underlying issues of trust and accountability. For example, the expansion of quality assurance suggests a move from a 'cycle of trust and confidence' to a 'cycle of suspicion' in higher education institutions (Rosa & Amaral, 2012, p. 114). Further, Gibbs (1998) argues that the move away from trust based on tacit common goals towards trust established on more explicit external accountability mechanism (such as managerial contractualism and auditing) has compromised the professional prestige of higher education institutions (and attack on the

³⁹ The literature on issues related to the trust crisis in higher education also lacks clarity with respect to indicating the starting point of the trust crisis in higher education. For instance, Bok (1992) implies that the 1970s marks the period where the withdrawal of public trust in higher education institutions became intense, while others, such as Enders (2013) trace the roots of the trust crisis as early as the 1950s. Although it becomes apparent that the issue of trust in higher education gradually penetrated the public limelight as a topic of heated discussion in the decades following the second world war, it also behoves one to take into account the fact that the nature of this discussion and its temporal reference could likely vary across national contexts.

professionalism of academics, as stated in Cheng (2012)) and their political influence. Such trends of growing demand on higher education institutions to improve accountability, transparency and efficiency are increasingly characterising the changing landscape of relationship between higher education institutions and governments (Migliore, 2012; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). The transformation saw the emergence of formal quality assurance requirements in higher education.

The literature alerts to the threats posed by the evolution of quality assurance from a model of the 1990s that could be described as a relatively softer, one that accommodates significant level of trust and gives room for academic autonomy to a system that is more prescriptive and audit and verification-oriented in nature (Hoecht, 2006). A similar trend of paradigm shift from a 'soft power' quality assurance system to a 'hard power' regime has been observed (Singh, 2012). It is important to understand that quality assurance systems with strong orientation towards ensuring control, accountability, and verification tend to challenge the development of mutual trust between stakeholders involved in the process, particularly between higher education institutions and external quality assurance agencies, and between academics and university management. Restructuring quality systems along the principle of mutual trust could contribute to stimulating the intrinsic motivation of higher education institutions and academics for shouldering their responsibilities for quality assurance, which was seen to have been significantly disempowered in the recent control-based models (Singh, 2012).

The adoption of control and accountability mechanisms into higher education following the drop in public trust is claimed to have significantly disenfranchised and infringed up on the academic profession and autonomy (Spier, 2013). The literature shows the advent of quality assurance systems characterised by strong emphasis on auditing and verification as key phenomenon that propelled higher education systems away from fundamental attributes of personal trust, common values, collegiality and empowered academics towards generalised distrust, formalised and impersonal control mechanisms (Power, 1997). The transformation can be interpreted as a move from trusting in academics to trusting in formalised procedures and systems (Harvey, 1995; Huber, 2013; Power, 1997; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Van Damme, 2000). Another issue the author sees as unintended consequence of an audit system is that it triggers the intensification of organisational overload and complication of organisational structures at higher education institutions. Despite audits are criticised for being underpinned by an assumption of mistrust, they can contribute to the revival and subsequent restoration of personal trust in the long haul (Huber, 2013).

As the tension rises between the traditional empowered academics and the recent move towards managerialism that brought more mechanisms of direct managerial control, higher education institutions need to strike balance between trust and control relations (Reed, 2001). This is particularly important as the use of legal regulations are often considered as emotive and controversial (Jackson, 1998) and rigid/harder instruments (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015), its infringement on institutional autonomy of higher education institutions has been seen as a concern. However, the strained relationship between higher education institutions and society may not be essentially harmful as long as universities are able to defend and safeguard their rights to be centres of critical thinking, with their institutional autonomy and academic freedom uncompromised. The tension between higher education institutions and society can become potentially harmful and transgress the fundamental identity and mode of functioning of higher education institutions if external stakeholders such as governments, politics, employers, donors, and other entities try to dictate what universities should and should not do. On the other hand, it must be noted that the pressure from external stakeholders can encourage universities to strive for more impactful academic services, and increasingly contribute to the pressing needs of society⁴⁰. Moreover, accountability is an integral component of a democratic society despite evident ambivalence (Trow, 1996). On balance, the development of shared norms and mutual trust is seen to be a considerably favourable state as opposed to the implementation of tight external regulations.

4.4 Competing views on the causes of the trust 'crisis' in higher education

In spite of the apparent consensus on the threats posed by the problem of the trust crisis facing higher education, there seems to be limited understanding regarding what prompted and aggravated it⁴¹. This section reviews relevant literature to identify

⁴⁰ Taken from the speech delivered by Jussi Välimaa during a panel discussion at the Southern African-Nordic Center (SANORD) conference held in August 2018 at the University of Jyväskylä.

⁴¹ It is important to note that although the majority of literature support the claim about the increasing erosion of trust in higher education, arguments that are sceptical of this widespread assertion can also be found. For example, Trow (1996) referred to evidence supporting the argument that the tangible confidence of public and other external stakeholders in higher education, in the US, in fact had increased, or at least not declined, at least between early 1980s and 1990s. The evidence Trow cited to

and analyse the competing explanations that scholars provided for why external stakeholders and the public withdrew some degree of trust in higher education.

The literature on the topic of accountability and trust in higher education offers competing explanations regarding the causes of the trust crisis in higher education. The differences and commonalities between these alternative accounts provide a useful insight into the issues that require closer investigation if the concerns underpinning the withdrawal of public trust in higher education are to be adequately understood and systematically addressed. The findings of the literature review suggest that a range of issues that are internal and external to higher education institutions, academic and non-academic in nature, could explain the growing criticism and distrust of the government, public, teachers, and students towards higher education institutions.

In an interesting professional account, Bok (1992) suggests that academic and non-academic issues could explain the growing criticism and distrust of the government, public, teachers, and students towards higher education institutions, for instance in the US from 1970s to 1990s. The respect accorded to higher education institutions and the professional status of academics began to erode. It is also argued that the inadequate engagement of higher education institutions in solving major societal challenges significantly contributed to the deterioration of the public image these institutions had in society. However, the most important reason for the growing distrust, as argued by Bok (1992) drawing on own experience as a university president during the time, was the growing awareness of the public that higher education institutions, especially the reputable ones, had started prioritising research over teaching (particularly undergraduate teaching), and the perceived declining attention given to the quality of education by these institutions. Similarly, Zumeta (2011) notes the prioritisation of research over undergraduate teaching as one of the factors that account for the growing accountability demands in higher education. Higher education institutions began to fall short of the expectations held by the government, public, and other stakeholders, for instance, alumni and private donors, who are the vital source of financial resources used for running these institutions. In addition to the perceived deterioration of the quality of education, a weakening

support this view include the increase in total enrolment, increase in international students studying in higher education institutions across the US, rise in tuition fee, higher income levels of graduates from higher education institutions than those from high schools, increase in private donations to higher education institutions, increase in financial support received from the federal government, absence of irregularities with student and alumni satisfaction surveys, and national polls suggesting a slightly recovering public confidence in higher education institutions after significant drop for a short period of time (Trow, 1996, p. 318). Such trends, despite their contextual and temporal limitations, reiterate the fragile and changing nature of the relationship between higher education and the public.

academic supremacy has become a significant factor in higher education institutions losing privileges in the eyes of society. One of the recent pressures bearing on higher education is the erosion of its preeminence as the centre of knowledge generation (Yorke, 1996). The concern and doubt that higher education may not continue to serve well future generations perpetuate the erosion of public trust in higher education institutions and give rise to a degree of distrust (Leveille, 2006).

In a partially consistent manner with Bok's account, Weingart (2013) explains the withdrawal of public trust from scientific communities of higher education institutions in relation to the declining confidence of stakeholders, particularly governments and the public, in the traditional mechanisms of scientific self-regulation, particularly of research (also indicated in Van Damme (2002)). A public discontent in higher education, procedural distrust and withdrawal of trust in the scientific and professional status of universities, and distrust in professional self-control of academics has grown (Enders, 2013). This perceived inadequacy of the traditional mechanisms of academic quality assurance, that had been for centuries largely grounded on institutional autonomy and informal norms, necessitated a transition to strong institutional systems of quality control and procedures of external accountability that rely more on market-based instruments and formal explicit requirements (Dill, 2000, p. 204; Van Damme, 2000, p. 10). Moreover, the academic profession is criticised for its tendency to neglect its principal duty to maintain the standards of academic work, assess the quality of fellow academics and standards of their work, and uphold the standards of duty it has to those stakeholders whom it serves (Elton, 1986). The ethics and morality of traditionally autonomous higher education institutions came under question, exacerbated by concerns over the challenges of assuring quality in transnational higher education activities, excessive marketisation of education services and orientation towards pursuing profit, compromise on academic standards, cases of financial misconducts, and unethical practices of institutional leaders (Prisacariu & Shah, 2016, p. 154).

While explaining the causes behind the loss of trust, Enders (2013) forwarded three complementary explanations: ideological attacks on what is considered as traditional higher education systems and institutions; massification of higher education sector and the subsequent organisational and functional complications it brought; and the growing requirements of capitalist systems on higher education institutions to ensure output legitimacy. The literature indicates that political rationality explains the distrust of governments towards higher education institutions and the subsequent demand for more accountability (Hansen et al., 2019; Zumeta, 2011). The ideological attacks on higher education are seen as deliberate political

actions of neoconservative ideology enacted by political leaders as a government policy (Enders, 2013). Thus, accountability is perceived as ideologically driven (Baird, 2011). The attacks on higher education by politicians over the years, for instance as Ronald Reagan launched his political career and run for office with a slogan of ‘clean up the mess at Berkeley’ (Kahn, 2004; Zumeta, 2011, p. 138), have led to a growing suspicion and closer scrutiny of higher education and higher education institutions. In this regard, the withdrawal of trust from higher education institutions is linked to government policies (Rosa & Amaral, 2012; Trow, 1996; Zumeta, 2011). Growing demands for accountability may be interpreted as an attempt, sometimes more symbolically, to transform the culture and value systems of higher education institutions in accordance with international and modern trends of public governance (Hansen et al., 2019). The policies that introduced governance and managerial reforms that sought to transform higher education institutions, and other public institutions, at least as in the case of the UK, into more private-like enterprises account for the increasing momentum of the debate on the decline of trust in higher education institutions (Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Trow, 1996). The increasing erosion of trust in higher education is associated with transformations that are driven by increasing pressures (from market and external stakeholders) that seek a shift from a traditional Humboldtian notion of a university to a more market-oriented and quasit-market orientations (Baert & Shipman, 2005, p. 157). The ‘emergence of markets as instruments of public regulation’ (Amaral & Rosa, 2010, p. 60) and importing of ‘business-based methods’ into higher education (Zumeta, 2011, p. 137) is considered as one of the causes for the loss of public trust in higher education. Moreover, the increasing emphasis on outputs is seen as one of the key features that characterise the changing relationship between state and higher education institutions (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). This growing emphasis placed on regulating outputs has triggered the development of audit and quality control systems (Enders, 2013). In the views of Trow (1996, p. 318), the claim of declining public trust in higher education institutions is a ‘convenient’ and ‘almost a necessary condition’ for governments to introduce more explicit, formal and tighter measures of accountability and regulation to the higher education sector. The widespread claim of higher education institutions losing public trust is essentially interpreted, in this case, as the excuse governments and external regulative actors submit to hold higher education institutions more accountable through more formalised and rigorous accountability instruments. It is noted that external stakeholders began to lose some degree of confidence on the capacities of higher education institutions to produce outputs at a level demanded by the increasingly competitive labour market and

knowledge-based economy (Van Damme, 2002). Additionally, massification has resulted in resource constraints and drop in traditional privilege, which contributed to exacerbating the tension between expectations and output (Enders, 2013). A trend of increasing political/bureaucratic accountability observed over the last decade can be attributed to a growing demand for economic efficiency at higher education institutions following the 2008 financial crisis (Hansen et al., 2019). Such arguments tend to focus on the external pressure, policy and systemic in nature, acting on higher education institutions.

Contrary to both Bok's and Weingart's (2013) narratives, Amaral et al., (2009) argue that there are two main causes for the declining of public trust in higher education institutions and most public service organisations. First, the advent of the New Public Management movement contributed to the desolation of public trust. This argument is also mentioned in other studies (e.g. Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Huber, 2013; Rosa & Amaral, 2012). The managerialism movement led to attempts aimed at undergoing paradigm shifts in the governance, internal processes and mode of operation of higher education institutions and the nature of their interaction with key stakeholders. This was argued to have brought considerable emphasis on accountability and efficiency. Second, the massification of the higher education and the proliferation of new and heterogeneous institutions is seen as another factor (also noted by Amaral and Rosa (2010) and Rosa and Amaral (2012)). The massification of higher education after the second World War which, besides straining the public cost of higher education and leading to the establishment of diverse forms of higher education institutions, presented an unprecedented challenge to the previous predominantly elite forms and arrangements of higher education (Trow, 1996). The concern over the quality of teachers, students, study programmes and institutions as a whole therefore gained momentum, thereby exacerbating the public trust crisis. A growing dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates further aggravated the problem (Zumeta, 2011). However, Engwall and Scott (2013, p. 180) disagree with such accounts, and instead argue that, 'the expansion of the higher education sector must be interpreted as a strong sign of trust in higher education institutions'. This argument draws attention to the political and financial support accorded to expanding the sector as an evidence to the argued growing trust, as opposed to what others claim has declined. The expansion of higher education would not have taken place without the growing recognition, on the part of governments and the public, of the need to expand the sector and instrumental role of higher education institutions in building the competitive edge of economies. Paradoxically, Engwall and Scott (2013), recognise massification of higher education institutions as one of

the key factors that contributed to the introduction of auditing and rigorous quality evaluations to the higher education landscape. Such arguments suggest that the changing relationship between state and higher education institutions, which involved increased institutional autonomy (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990) and rise of the 'Evaluative State', can be interpreted as an 'adjustment to mass higher education' (Neave, 1988, p. 22).

In another study, Zumeta (2011, pp. 137-139) identified six interrelated factors that explain the trend of increasing accountability demands and changing expectations for higher education amidst shaking trust foundations. First, massification, combined with soaring public expense of higher education and economic recession, for instance during the 1980s, is argued to have intensified demands for public accountability. Second, the adoption of 'business-based methods' brought emphasis on cost and quality control in higher education (p. 137). Third, the growing dissatisfaction with a perceived inadequate quality of graduates increased the criticism of higher education. Fourth, the strengthening professional capacity of legislatures and better familiarity with data on the performance of higher education institutions exacerbated the scrutiny of higher education. Fifth, changes in government policy, facilitated by 'culture wars', 'break down of deference' and tensions between higher education institutions and governments, intensified a closer scrutiny and suspicion against higher education (p. 138). The sixth factor points to the increasing government criticism of rising costs of higher education and scrutiny of internal decision making of higher education institutions. These factors give insight into several issues internal and external to higher education institutions that explain some of the growing criticism of higher education and subsequent demands for more accountability.

Other explanations question the ethics and morality of traditionally autonomous higher education institutions. Scientific and financial malpractices, compromise on academic standards, unethical practices of institutional leaders, rising tuition fee, excessive marketisation of education services and orientation towards pursuing profit, and including drug use in campuses account for the erosion of the respect accorded to higher education institutions and the professional status of academics (Bok, 1992; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). Recurring breaches of ethical codes and fraud in recent times in higher education institutions pose considerable threat to more loss of public trust (Bird, 2013; Spier, 2013). The expansion of academic corruptions and other forms of ethical problems taking place in higher education institutions such as mismanagement of funds, embezzlement, bribery and admission scandals, academic fraud, issuing fake degrees and academic records, and pursuit of profit at the expense

of quality and academic values threaten the traditional privileges of academic freedom, autonomy of higher education institutions and erode the rationale for sustained public support (Altbach, 2005). Further, media and market (competition for research funding, students and faculty) play dynamic roles in accentuating the importance of trust in present-day's higher education (Engwall & Scott, 2013). Competition in universities serves to explain issues of accountability and trust (McKelvey, 2013). For instance, Trow (1996) claims that the issue of trust tends to be more critical in the higher education systems, such as in the US, where the role of market forces are stronger than in other systems, such as in most European countries, which are characterised by relatively more stringent accountability requirements.

However, it is important to note that there can be nuances within the degree of trust and accountability relations in each higher education system. In the Finnish higher education system, for instance, the Ministry of Education and Culture uses one of the most stringent accountability systems in the form of a performance-based funding scheme, which makes up about 75 per cent funding in higher education institutions, whereas the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre employs institutional quality audit as a major external mechanism of quality management designed to enhance quality. In contrast to the strong performance-based funding model (Hansen et al., 2019), the reliance on enhancement-led quality approach to quality management suggests high level of trust on the internal capacity of higher education institutions for academic self-regulation which has led to less needs for accreditation. Within the same higher education system, accountability may prevail in regulating certain aspects of higher education institutions, whereas more trust-oriented approaches could be implemented in other areas.

Furthermore, politics can account, in part, for mistrust and suspicion of government towards higher education institutions. The issue of politics and political tensions may explain the trust crisis in higher education systems that are characterised by tight government control over higher education institutions and where governments have pronounced vested interest in suppressing and quelling internal political movements and activism within institutions that challenge established political status-quo and silencing ardent dissident academic communities (Asgedom, 2008; Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). The political pressure in the governance of higher education institutions may involve interference in the institutional decision making processes, prosecution and imprisonment of academics who challenge a prevailing political status-quo, ban on certain subjects which may be deemed extra sensitive to the political establishment, and manipulating decisions related to funding

and resource allocation (O'Malley, 2019). Such trends have been observed, for instance, in Hungary, Russia, Poland, Brazil, Turkey, and a several African countries such as Ethiopia⁴². The recent 'anti-extradition law amendment bill' protests in Hong Kong led by university students show how politics is increasingly agitating the relationship between higher education institutions and governments. Governments, in countries with weaker democratic culture, may tend to be more interested in maintaining a tight grip on higher education institutions, which they may perceive to be sources of formidable opposition. Fitting classrooms with surveillance cameras is increasingly becoming a common practice in Chinese universities, which might be taken as an example of lack of trust and the need for more closely monitoring day-to-day teaching and learning activities, although authorities attempt to justify it by citing its use for security reasons, monitor behaviour of students and time management of academic staff. Regardless of how convincing such justifications are, the implementation of invasive controlling mechanisms may imply the existence of significant level of distrust between higher education institutions and governments in general and between the management of higher education institutions and academics in particular. However, politics and political motives as a possible explanation for the trust problem in higher education merits more empirical investigation.

As discussed above, the literature review revealed competing views on the causes of the withdrawal of public trust from higher education. These accounts address both internal and external aspects of higher education institutions issues pertaining to academic and non-academic matters. Internally, massification of higher education, declining quality of education and perceived inadequacy of academic self-regulation mechanisms, limited capacity for driving societal development and knowledge economy, failure to transform and modernise internal functioning and management, and ethical and moral malpractices are identified by several scholars as factors that explain the decline in the trust and confidence the public has entrusted with higher education institutions. Externally, government policy realignments and governance reform interventions, rise of New Public Management approach in public sectors, pressures from capitalist and neo-liberal ideologies, increasing focus on output oriented measurement, and growing expectations of external stakeholders and perceived inadequacy of higher education institutions to meet external demands are argued to have perpetuated the erosion of public trust in higher education institutions and given rise to accountability requirements. The literature also suggests

⁴² Section 6.6.4 discusses how political motives contributed to the distrust of government towards higher education institutions.

that no single dominant factor, rather multiple explanations, account for the withdrawal of public trust from higher education. It is also important to acknowledge that the degree of importance that each of the cited causes for the decline in trust and the specific processes and circumstances through which such trends took place may depend on the peculiar characteristics of a higher education system and nature and forms of relationships established between higher education and external stakeholders. In spite of the informative capacity of the alternative explanations briefly discussed above, on balance, it would be reasonable to point out the need for more empirical evidence in concretely establishing the causes of the trust crisis and the relationship between the eroding public trust and the rise of formal control and accountability requirements in higher education.

4.5 Restoring public trust: Role of quality assurance and institutional management

Quality assurance serves as a vital tool that assists and coerces higher education institutions to give due emphasis to aligning their education, research and community service with societal expectations (Jacobs, 2010), thereby contributing to renewal of public trust. The literature indicates that several researchers recognise quality assurance as a mechanism that helps restore public trust in higher education (Elassy, 2015; Harvey, 2011; Huber, 2013; Kettunen, 2012). Similarly, Stensaker and Maassen (2015) recognise the capacity of quality assurance to serve as a tool for creating trust in transnational and cross-border higher education activities. Formal quality assurance procedures, among other benefits, enable higher education institutions to demonstrate the status of their quality and institutional performance, which can help enlarge the trust and confidence of the state, employers and the public (Van Damme, 2002). The emergence of quality assurance, in this case, can be seen as an attempt by higher education institutions to regain public trust (Amaral & Rosa, 2010), since '[t]rust cannot be built without quality and quality measures' (Bergan, 2012, p. 56). Higher education institutions, in their effort to regain the public trust, are increasingly recognising the importance of demonstrating evidences of quality in enhanced student learning than traditionally pursuing reputation and mere passing of accreditation and audit reviews conducted by external quality assurance agencies (Schindler et al., 2015).

The rise of audit culture and quality assessment are interpreted as efforts aimed at ensuring and serving accountability functions, through promoting greater

transparency at higher education institutions and other state-funded organisations (Baert & Shipman, 2005). External accountability evaluations, such as accreditation and quality audits of higher education institutions, may provide ground essential for earning confidence and continued support from stakeholders (Trow, 1996). A robust quality culture can help rebuild trust on higher education (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). Additionally, an extensive review of international experiences, conducted as part of the Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Framework study, concluded that 'quality assurance creates trust' (Okebukola, 2014, p. 8), mainly through improving transparency, harmonisation and comparability, international recognition of studies and qualification, and facilitating cooperation among higher education institutions. In the same way, Zumeta (2011) suggests that demonstrating more transparency, efficiency and justifying the value of higher education for society and capacities it creates can enhance the abilities of higher education institutions to sustain public support and acquire resources. Furthermore, fostering employability of graduates through placing emphasis on training and knowledge production that takes into account the needs of the rapidly changing labour market, restabilising robust links with society and broader societal needs, and working in partnership with other institutions could assist higher education institutions in satisfying complex expectations and regaining public trust (Paterson, 2019).

The argument on the role that quality assurance has in restoring public trust in higher education is predicated on a perceived link between the quality and trust. The literature suggests that 'trust builds on a perception of quality', such that higher education institutions that the public perceives to deliver quality education and research tend to be trusted more than those higher education institutions that are seen to lack in quality (Bergan, 2012, p. 53). This suggests that the perception of quality may inform trust in the context of higher education.

The management and leadership of a higher education institution has an important role to play in mobilising institutional efforts in the direction of enhancing the restoration of public trust. Effectively addressing the trust crisis requires, among other things, the management of higher education institutions to take active role in mediating between institutional aspirations and demands of external stakeholders, balancing emphasis between trust relations and control instruments, and safeguarding institutional autonomy and integrity of academic profession. Leadership at higher education institutions can play a crucial role in supporting their institutions regain public confidence, for instance, through actively communicating to external stakeholders the essential role that higher education has for national development and the need for fulfilling the basic needs their institutions have to

effectively carry out their missions (Leveille, 2006). The current era of managerialism emphasise the management of higher education institutions serves as a 'bridgehead' of the political power of state (Van Damme, 2000, p. 15), amidst trends of deregulation, increasing institutional autonomy and expansion of quality assurance as part of growing demands for accountability. Academic leaders play a leading role in mediating four major issues: 'recognise, identify and interpret external needs, demands and expectations; communicate external demands to colleagues; define the institutions potential and the resources needed to realise this potential; and communicate internal needs and potentials to national authorities and relevant external stakeholders' (Aasen & Stensaker, 2007, p. 379).

Leadership in higher education institutions is required to have a comprehensive perspective that allows grasping the purpose and mission of higher education in tandem with the societal, national and global need (Paterson, 2019). The cultivation of a collegial form of governance enables leadership to remain integrated in the established institutional culture, develop a sense of collective effort, balance modern technocracy and collegial trust, and ensure a 'trustful mediation' between internal and external values, demands and potentials (Aasen & Stensaker, 2007). Leadership has key role to play in supporting higher education institutions respond to national strategic development needs of society, which could assist them in regaining public trust (Paterson, 2019). This can support higher education institutions in developing shared norms that enhance the development of mutual trust. However, the task of balancing between internal institutional interests and aspirations and the interests of external stakeholders can be challenging for higher education institutions (Lyytinen et al., 2017). Moreover, institutional and governance reforms promoting elements of accountability, managerialism and market-type mechanisms could also help higher education institutions in restoring public trust (Enders, 2013). Leadership may initiate reforms and strengthen internal quality assurance mechanisms to improve standards of institutional functions and communicate an image of quality, accountability and commitment to external stakeholders.

Higher education institutions need to strive to honour the trust of stakeholders (Massy, 2003). Trust forms an integral component of the social contract that inextricably link higher education and the public, and therefore the erosion of this trust or development of mistrust need to be addressed properly to contain the wide-ranging implications (Leveille, 2006). An assessment of how well higher education institutions maintain and improve the trust held by stakeholders (e.g. students, governments, employers, regulatory bodies, quality assurance agencies, professional associations and others) constitutes a crucial aspect of higher education governance

(Bloxham, 2012). This suggests the need for higher education institutions to strive to regain the confidence of the public.

4.6 Quality assurance agencies as intermediaries between governments and higher education institutions

In most countries, quality assurance bodies serve as intermediary agencies of state, particularly in the case of statutory agencies (Harvey, 2002; King, 2015), which monitor the quality and standards of higher education institutions on behalf of the state or association of higher education institutions. The trend of granting more self-autonomy to higher education institutions subsequently placed greater importance to quality assurance agencies as intermediary structures that support the relationship between governments and higher education institutions (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). The responsibility of the state to regulate the standards of higher education institutions is, in practice, transferred to quality assurance agencies, as a part of the broader transformation of the relationship between governments and higher education institutions, which brought deregulation and more autonomy to higher education institutions and a subsequent growing demand for accountability from governments. Such an increasing move towards accountability and the 'Evaluative State' brought a transfer of key functions of regulation and control from central state to intermediary bodies, such as quality assurance agencies (Neave, 1998).

The notion of quality assurance agencies as intermediaries between governments and higher education institutions enables perceiving the relationship between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies as a part of the broader government-university relationship. The transformation of the relationship between state and higher education institutions saw a decrease in state control, which was accompanied by a rise in 'state surveillance' in higher education institutions (Neave, 1998, p. 282). From such perspectives, quality management systems can be viewed as controlling mechanisms, through which governments and management of higher education institutions exercise a degree of 'surveillance from distance' to ensure that higher education systems function in manners that meet requirements (Barrow, 1999, p. 35). Quality assurance is therefore seen as an indirect method of governing higher education institutions, where direct state intervention is voluntarily relinquished. Accordingly, external quality assurance agencies assume the mandate for conducting accreditation, audit, quality assessments, set and check standards, disseminate information and good practices. In doing so, quality assurance agencies

provide a platform through which an indirect influence of the state is exercised on higher education institutions. Quality assurance and quality assurance agencies thus serve as a medium through which exchanges takes place between institutional autonomy of higher education institutions and compliance and quality control mechanisms employed by governments (Van Damme, 2000). This is consistent with the overall trend of 'remote government control' amidst increasing institutional autonomy (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990, p. 82).

Moreover, the literature on trust also identifies the use of third parties as conduits of trust between a trustor and trustee, which can serve to convey and amplify expectations (Kramer, 1999). The role of quality assurance agencies as 'mediator' (Danø & Stensaker, 2007, p. 91) or intermediaries between state and higher education institutions can be interpreted as that of being a third-party conduit of trust and accountability between the national and institutional levels (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). However, the information such third parties relay may lack completeness, directness, and, in some cases, objectivity (Kramer, 1999). The use of third parties and agents may hide asymmetric power relations, since they rarely exercise equal level of control on both parties engaged in the relationship (Hardy et al., 1998; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

Quality assurance, at national and institutional levels, forms an integral component of higher education governance. It provides a medium for power relationship between higher education institutions and external stakeholders and between management and academics within higher education institutions (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). The changing relationship between state and higher education institutions saw an increasing emphasis on quality assurance, output-control and overall accountability in exchange for increased institutional autonomy (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). As such, governments use quality assurance requirements, relevant quality assurance policies and performance indicators as leverage for resource allocation to higher education institutions (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). However, externally imposed definition of quality, quality standards and procedures, and strategic objectives of quality assurance can compromise the traditional power and privileges of higher education institutions and their academic communities (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). The literature perceives quality control, quality assurance and quality assessment as imposed on higher education institutions in a top-down orientation (Ehlers, 2009). In their reviews of the existing definitions of quality in higher education, Schindler et al. (2015) identified a recent trend of increasing interest in stakeholder-based conception of quality.

The increase in external accountability demands that characterise the changing relationship between governments and higher education institutions entailed traditional and informal mechanisms of academic self-regulation, which for long were considered to be sufficient in assuring academic standards, to be replaced with explicit and formal quality assurance procedures (Van Damme, 2000). In this regard, the adoption and increasing reliance on quality assurance in higher education indicates that ‘external accountability replaces mutual trust between stakeholders’ (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016, p. 15). Internationally, the increasing competition in the global education market has challenged the long-held trust in the quality and standards of higher education institutions and required the application of more formal requisites to ensure transparency, international credibility and guarantee quality (Kettunen, 2008). However, the task of ensuring quality and standards in cross-border higher education is challenging due to the lack of well-established and formal arrangements responsible for managing the quality of growing transnational and cross-boundary higher education activities (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015).

Tensions between governments and higher education institutions over the ownership of quality assurance agencies has continued to be an issue in many countries (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002), since this has implications for the autonomy, legitimacy and credibility of quality assurance agencies and nature of their relationship with higher education institutions. In a recent comparative study of the relationship between national quality assurance agencies and governments, Hou et al. (2020) further concluded that securing autonomy has remained a major challenge facing quality assurance agencies. The literature indicates that quality assurance agencies are mostly initiated by governments and, in some cases, through the initiatives taken by professional associations, associations of higher education institutions and through actions taken jointly with governments (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey, 2002; Hou et al., 2020). Further, quality assurance agencies may also follow a corporatist and supermarket approach (Hou et al., 2020). The level of managerial and operational autonomy the agencies have is, in part, determined by government priorities, funding, political agenda and nature of accountability to internal and external stakeholders (Harvey, 2002, pp. 249-250). The changing relationship between higher education institutions and state characterise the environment influenced by governmental and political processes in which quality assurance mechanisms and policies were established in many countries (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002), which created challenges for the autonomy of these agencies. In addition to the issue of autonomy, questions over possible conflicts of interest may arise in the operations of statutory quality assurance agencies. In such cases, the

quality evaluation of public higher education institutions, which are funded by governments and centrally administered by Ministries, by a quality assurance agencies, which too rely on government funding and accountable to Ministerial structures, could be seen as tantamount to Ministries evaluating themselves (Salmi et al., 2017). The objectivity of evaluations is thus evidently questioned.

The nature of quality assurance agenda and engagement of quality assurance agencies represent the tension, struggle and compromise between higher education institutions and the state (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008, pp. 85-86). There can be tensions between governments and higher education institutions since they tend to hold different opinion on issues including how to define quality, how to distribute responsibilities for quality assessments, what the purpose of quality assessment should be, what type of performance indicators should be used, whether the results of quality assessment should be linked to funding, and what effects and sanctions external quality assurance should bear (Vroeijenstijn, 1995, pp. 31-32). The nature and character of higher education governance systems is shaped, in part, by the driving purpose adopted, methods employed, and expected outcomes held of the quality assurance in higher education. In such cases, the nature of government-university relationship can inform the understanding of the relationship between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies.

Moreover, the tensions between reciprocity and independence pose a challenge for the functioning of quality assurance agencies and their relationship with higher education institutions (Williams, 2016). Studies show the need to balance reciprocity and independence between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, without excessively relying solely on one (Leeuw, 2002). In the absence of this balance, academics may tend to perceive the expansion of quality assurance and monitoring requirements as manifestations of a 'lack of mutual trust' and lack of reciprocal accountability (Newton, 2002, p. 46). Such systems of external monitoring and accountability may also tend to be widely perceived by academics as measures that reinforce scale of managerialism and compromise mutual trust between academics and managers in higher education institutions (Harvey, 2002). Increasing trends of managerialism in higher education institutions has led to management exercising more power in negotiating with interests of external stakeholders and overseeing the implementation of regulations on quality (Van Damme, 2000). The literature indicates similar trends of weakening of trust between managers and academic staff (Gibbs, 1998; Trow, 1994). A recent comparative study showed that academics in Denmark tend to view the growing demands for accountability mechanisms such as evaluation and control as a sign of mistrust

towards higher education institutions, whereas academics in other Nordic countries tend to perceive it less negatively (Hansen et al., 2019). Moreover, higher education institutions and academics may also distrust quality control measures if the instruments of assessment used in external reviews fail to be properly evaluated (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013). A good quality assurance process is, among other things, expected to take into account mutual trust between actors, systematic criteria and norms for evaluation, and autonomy and self-regulation of higher education institutions (Kells, 1995a; Neave, 1988).

Such considerations are vital since quality assurance may inherently create an imbalance of power and responsibility, which leads to power shifting away from inside higher education institutions to external stakeholders amidst increasing responsibility and demands on academics (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016)⁴³. This suggests that established approaches to quality assurance tend to accumulate the power to define quality, set quality assurance policies and regulations, determine quality standards, prescribe procedures and monitor implementation of quality assessment in the hands of external stakeholders such as governments, ministries and quality assurance agencies. A major issue in this regard concerns the fact that the standards against which quality is assessed in external evaluations are often defined by governments and quality assurance agencies rather than students and academic staff (Harvey, 2002). Governments continue to hold a crucial role in the activities and quality assurance processes carried out by quality assurance agencies, but the relations these agencies forge with higher education institutions depends on the specific negotiation and compromise with each institution (Van Damme, 2000). Such problems can be frequently observed within quality assurance systems that are dominated by compliance orientation. This entails the need to delegate sufficient autonomy and power to higher education institutions and frontline academics to enable them to develop effective mechanisms and own internal quality assurance processes. Addressing the power imbalance especially with regard to how quality assurance operates in today's higher education landscape can support the development of a quality culture at higher education institutions. The cultivation of mutual trust and accountability between higher education institutions and external stakeholders can support the development of an institutional quality culture oriented towards improving quality, promote shared responsibility for quality, and renew public trust in higher education (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). In this case, shared concerns for quality can link together the key internal and external 'players' in the

⁴³ Internally, the rise of managerialism has shifted decision-making authority in higher education institutions from academics to administration (e.g. Ruokonen, 2018; Van Damme, 2000).

game of quality assessment including staff, students, boards of universities and academic councils of faculties, government, ministries, parliament, inspectorate or external quality assurance and monitoring bodies, experts of quality assessment (Vroeijsstijn, 1995, p. 31).

The scope and depth of external quality evaluation by quality assurance agencies can affect the extent to which the evaluations are accepted and yield tangible impacts at higher education institutions. For instance, quality evaluations with excessive focus on checking written policies and documents rather than practices employed by academics to assure quality of teaching and learning can promote a ‘culture of compliance’, where higher education institutions tend to invest their effort, time and resources in the ‘game’ of being audited, for instance by focusing on producing high quality policy documents which may not fully represent the nuances and complexities of actual academic behaviour and institutional practices at higher education institutions (Dill, 1998, p. 72). In such cases, external quality evaluations can lead to ‘game playing’ and orchestration (Leeuw, 2002, p. 145). Despite policies and documents are useful to gain insight into institutional intent, ascertaining the extent to which quality culture truly pervades into the teaching and learning activities of a higher education institution requires a systematic assessment of department and programme level engagements (Dill, 1998). External quality assessment, accreditations and audits may bear limited impact on improving quality standards unless they stimulate a culture of honest critical reflection, actively engage all internal constituents and are systematically linked to tangible development works at higher education institutions (Trow, 1996).

4.7 The application of trust in higher education studies

The concept of trust has been widely used in various disciplines such as sociology, psychology and other behavioural studies, political science, management, organisational studies, and a number of other fields of studies. Trust is also increasingly becoming an important topic of discussion in the field of higher education. Such trends stimulate intellectual interest in analysing the nature and extent of the application of the concept in higher education studies. Reviewing existing literature of such kind therefore becomes more important. The insights gained from the review of higher education studies and scholarly writings that focused on trust is discussed below. The table included in appendix 2 presents the review of literature on the application of trust in higher education studies.

Theme of research and discussion. The topic of governance (including issues of accountability, management and leadership)⁴⁴, quality assurance⁴⁵, and the interaction between higher education institutions and stakeholders (government, public, industry, market and media, and issues of student loyalty and university brand)⁴⁶ constitute the three most common themes in relation to which the concept of trust is studied in higher education. This suggests that there is an encouraging attempt, although not yet well-established, to bring the discussion of trust into quality assurance⁴⁷. On the contrary, the concept of trust is rarely applied in higher education researches that focus on teaching, learning, and research.

Nature of analysis. The overwhelming majority of the scholarly analysis conducted on the concept of trust in higher education studies has been mainly conceptual, theoretical, and analysis of literature in nature. The review identified a small number of empirical studies that investigated trust within the context of higher education⁴⁸. In this regard, it seems that more room exists for conducting empirical analysis.

Analytical and theoretical framework. The literature review could not identify well-established and widely applied theoretical or analytical framework within higher education studies for theoretical and empirical analysis of trust. The current use of frameworks could be grouped into three. First, some studies applied simple frameworks such as dimensions and forms of trust that are mainly derived from existing conceptualisations of trust (e.g. Gibbs, 1998; Pope, 2004; Vidovich & Currie, 2011). Second, an increasing number of higher education studies applied more formal theories when researching trust. For instance, some of these theories include such as Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing (Phelps & Campbell, 2012); Principal-Agent model of relationship (Huber, 2013); Organisation Development Human Process Theory, Social Exchange Theory and Transaction

⁴⁴ For instance, Aasen and Stensaker (2007), Bloxham (2012), De Boer (2002); Enders (2013), Hansen et al. (2019), Leveille (2006), Michael et al. (2000), Michael et al. (2001), Michael and Schwartz (1999), Migliore (2012), Pope (2004), Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009), Vidovich and Currie (2011), Yankech (2015)

⁴⁵ For instance, Amaral et al. (2009), Bergan (2012), Hoecht (2006), Huber (2013), Jackson (1998), Singh (2012), Stensaker and Maassen (2015), Sultan and Wong (2013)

⁴⁶ For instance, Bok (1992), Bird (2013), Engwall and Scott (2013), Gibbs (1998), McKelvey (2013), Nevzat et al. (2016), Perin et al. (2012), Trow (1996), Weingart (2013)

⁴⁷ The researcher also looked at a project titled 'Towards Trust in Quality Assurance Systems' which took a more practical, rather than theoretically underpinned approach towards trust, as it saw transparency of procedures and information as a key means to enhancing decision-making and credibility of quality assurance results.

⁴⁸ For instance, Aasen and Stensaker (2007), Hansen et al. (2019), Hoecht (2006), Martins and Nunes (2016), Michael et al. (2000), Michael et al., (2001), Michael and Schwartz (1999), Nevzat et al. (2016), Perin et al. (2012), Sultan and Wong (2013), Yankech (2015)

Cost Economies Theory (Yankech, 2015); and Attitude Theory (Nevzat et al., 2016). Third, there are also few higher education studies that attempted to develop analytical frameworks that address the concept of trust. For instance, Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009) and Stensaker and Maassen (2015) proposed mechanisms for building trust in higher education and quality assurance. These works however are more relevant for gaining insight into how trust could be built than for examining trustworthiness. There are also some studies that conducted their discussion without using any kind of framework. Moreover, the review also identified studies that seem to make indirect, rather than direct, inferences about various aspects of trust from empirically examining the nature and levels accountability (e.g. Hansen et al., 2019). The conceptual discussion of Trow (1996) seem to supplement for its lack of conceptually systematic analysis of trust by linking the discussion of trust issues to the nature of markets and accountability.

Levels of analysis. The review shows that diverse levels of analysis are in use. System level analysis of trust in higher education studies seems to be the most common method. These studies rooted their analysis primarily on the overall higher education system and looked at the interplay within its constituents. Interestingly, the concept of trust has also been analysed at an individual level. The individual propensity to trust, loyalty, and trusting behaviours constitute the main aspects of these studies. Significant number of studies also investigated the issue of trust at an institutional (organisational) level. These studies analysed trust and trust relationships within specific higher education institutions and organisational entities. In addition, some studies also tend to combine different levels of analysis. For example, individual and institutional levels are combined in the work of Martins and Nunes (2016), individual and system levels in Gibbs (1998) and system and institutional levels in Vidovich and Currie (2011) and Bergan (2012).

Method of analysis. The overwhelming majority of the reviewed works used qualitative analysis while only few empirical works adopted quantitative and mixed research methods⁴⁹. This suggests that the qualitative analysis has been widely applied in higher education studies that focus on the issue of trust. This may also suggest that quantitatively measuring the concept of trust has been challenging, at least in the sense that the quantitative analysis of trust has remained to be an uncharted sphere of research.

Research context. As far as the geographical context of the reviewed works is concerned, it becomes apparent that most higher education studies investigate trust

⁴⁹ For example, Hansen et al. (2019), Michael et al. (2000), Michael et al. (2001), Michael and Schwartz (1999)

within some specific national contexts. The review also indicated to a number of studies that extend their discussion to international (e.g. Amaral et al., 2009; Hansen et al., 2019; Trow, 1996) and global contexts (Bird, 2013; Bloxham, 2012; Enders, 2013; Engwall & Scott, 2013; Huber, 2013; Phelps & Campbell, 2012; Spier, 2013; Weingart, 2013) albeit fewer than those set within national contexts. Higher education studies that analyse issues of trust at continental levels are also on the rise.

Use of distrust and mistrust as concepts. Although trust and distrust/mistrust are seen as mutually linked to each other, as two sides of the same coin, and as concepts that coexist rather than opposite to one another, it is possible to infer from the literature review that higher education studies on the topic of trust, with the exception of a few studies (e.g. Enders, 2013; Huber, 2013; Spier, 2013; Vidovich & Currie, 2011), only discuss the issue of trust and do not make sufficient effort to analyse and conduct a conceptually structured discussion of distrust/mistrust. This highlights a gap in the literature where further studies could make contribution by bringing the analysis of trust and distrust/mistrust together into a unified piece of scientific work.

4.8 Conclusion

Trust and accountability provide key notions through which issues of quality and quality assurance in higher education can be explored. The study duly recognises the relative advantages and limitations of separately relying on trust and accountability. In fact, trust and accountability are considered to be essential and interconnected such that balancing the two is could be viewed as strategically more beneficial and comprehensive. The dynamics of trust and accountability in higher education are shaped by a multitude of issues internal and external to higher education institutions and which can be academic and non-academic in nature.

The changing relationship between higher education institutions and governments provides a useful broader context for analysing trust between institutions and external quality assurance agencies. As such, the understanding of quality assurance agencies as intermediaries between governments and higher education institutions enables exploring extent of overall trust and analysing its implications for the nature of quality management model.

For higher education institutions, earning the trust of governments, Ministries, quality assurance agencies and other external stakeholders may entail adhering to quality standards and demonstrating evidence of adequate improvements in quality. It is argued that higher education institutions need to prove that credible internal

mechanisms of quality assurance are in place to be trusted by key stakeholders. An enduring commitment to safeguarding the quality of education, research and community engagement, development of overall institutional capacity for assuring and enhancing quality, and openness in communicating perceived strengths and weaknesses during quality evaluations can be crucial for higher education institutions to improve their trustworthiness. The scale of perceived risk further informs the overall level of trust. Where such preconditions are lacking, external stakeholders such as Ministries and quality assurance agencies can employ formal instruments of control and regulation.

Weak trust in higher education institutions could accentuate demands for external control and ensuring accountability whereas strong trust in institutions may create an environment relatively more conducive for reliance on perceived shared values and focusing on institutional autonomy and the provision of support to internal mechanisms of quality enhancement. Accordingly, the theoretical and analytical framework applied in this inquiry links a weaker trust in higher education institutions to a predominantly accountability-oriented quality management model. The framework further establishes a relative consistency between strong trust in higher education institutions and preference to a primarily enhancement-led quality management model. The presence of moderate trust could likely create an environment favourable for balancing accountability and enhancement purposes in quality management.

5 THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the study describes the theoretical and analytical framework that guides the empirical investigation of the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions and its implications for the nature of the quality management models applied in a higher education system. The conceptual and theoretical discussions presented in the previous chapters inform the components of the framework.

The chapter starts by describing the rationale for constructing a theoretical and analytical framework, which relate to the scarcity of suitable theories and problems concerning contextual misfits for application in higher education studies, fragmentation of existing models and lack of comprehensive frameworks. The chapter then discusses in detail the four key components of the theoretical and analytical framework: conceptual dimensions of trust, perspectives on trust building, insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust, and quality management models. The chapter attempts to contextualise and operationalise the insights that each conceptual, theoretical and analytical model offers to the context of higher education in general and the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions in particular. In doing so, the study strives to ensure consistency with the assumptions of the underlying theoretical framework. The chapter also briefly summarises the links between components of the theoretical and analytical framework which guide the empirical investigation of this study. It shows how each component of the framework links to the two main research questions. Finally, the chapter reflects on the challenges of empirically investigating trust.

5.1 Rationale for constructing a theoretical and analytical framework

One of the challenges the researcher has faced in undertaking this study has been the difficulty of finding well-established, conventional and suitable theories that can guide the theoretical and empirical analysis of trust between a quality assurance

agency and higher education institutions and what implications this may have for the nature of quality management models. As the review of previous studies discussed in Chapters One and Four indicate, there is a lack of well-established, commonly applied and full-fledged theories and analytical frameworks in the literature capable of exploring, describing and analysing issues related to trust between higher education institutions and external quality assurance practices and other aspects of the relationship between internal and external quality assurance structures in higher education.

Theoretical and analytical frameworks found from the literature presented two main challenges for the researcher. The first problem was the mismatch and incompatibility between available theoretical frameworks and the context of this study. Most of existing theories, frameworks and models have been developed outside the field of higher education, which constrains their contextual relevance to analysing issues in higher education such as quality and quality assurance. This is because the conceptual, theoretical and empirical discussion of trust has been well-developed in such as management and organisational studies, sociology and behavioural studies, business, political science and other fields. These disciplines have approached the issue of trust through their unique disciplinary lenses and theoretical perspectives (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). As shown in Chapter Four, application of trust in higher education studies in general and in analysing quality assurance issues is still at early stages. The discussion of trust is not well-developed in the higher education literature (Pope, 2004).

The researcher had initially attempted to use Principal-Agent Theory or Agency Theory as a theoretical framework to examine the relationship between higher education institutions and quality assurance agency in the context of the Ethiopian higher education. The application of the theory in higher education studies evidenced the capabilities and insights agency theory offers for understanding problems that arise in government-university relationship, particularly in delegating tasks to higher education institutions, allocating resources necessary for their accomplishment and in monitoring the accomplishment of the delegated tasks, and the governance mechanisms governments employ to overcome these challenges (Kivistö, 2007). The issues of mistrust, accountability, efficiency, and other critical challenges associated with transformations in the landscape of government-university relationship can be explained with the help of agency theory.

In spite of the evident potential of the theory for offering useful insights, some theoretical and practical mismatches prevented its application in guiding the empirical investigation of this study. In his theoretical study, Kivistö (2007) asserts

that agency theory can be applied in the context of higher education to analyse relationships between higher education institutions and governments, and possibly including other external stakeholders, where three conditions are met: delegation of task, allocation of necessary resources and monitoring of task performance. It could be established that the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia (i.e., principal), delegates quality assurance responsibilities to higher education institutions (i.e., agents), provide technical and expert support for higher education institutions in carrying out quality assurance responsibilities, and evaluate and monitor the overall performance of institutions in quality assurance work through for instance quality audits, accreditation and external validation. However, the fact that the quality assurance agency does not provide financial resources to higher education institutions creates an obstacle. This is because although resources may broadly encompass financial, material, technical and human resources, literature on the application of agency theory in higher education studies (e.g. Kivistö, 2007) suggests that fully exploiting the descriptive, analytical and predictive capacities of the theory is possible when analysing hierarchical relationships where the principal ideally allocates financial resources to the agent. This suggests that the prominent advantages of the agency theories lay in the insights it offers for understanding the economic behaviour of the agent (Kivistö, 2007; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015). The incompatibilities may also extend to other key assumptions related to agency variables, agency cost, and mechanisms of governing agency problems.

As a result, the use of agency theory was abandoned to avoid a potentially questionable and incomplete application of the theory which may arise from neglecting its major financial and economic underpinnings. Moreover, agency theory can be more suited to analysing the possible problems of informational asymmetry and goal conflicts, including tendencies of opportunistic behaviour, between higher education institutions and the quality assurance agency, but the assumptions of the theory about agency variables and incentives and mechanisms of governance may not readily fit the context of this research.

The second problem is the fragmentation of existing models and frameworks. There are two sides to this challenge. First, the literature review showed that studies employ various concepts, models and frameworks. As presented in Chapter One, the higher education literature concerning internal and external quality assurance tend to use diverse models and frameworks which rarely explore trust issues. These concepts and analytical models include concept of institutional autonomy (Jacobs, 1998), impact evaluation (Damian et al., 2015; Kajaste et al., 2015), cultural theory (Veiga et al., 2011), causal social mechanism (Leiber et al., 2015), pragmatism (Ansah,

2015), principal-agent theory (Borgos, 2013), critical systems thinking (Houston & Maniku, 2005), process management framework (Kettunen, 2012), social mapping and repertory grid technique (Bloxham et al., 2015), concept of professional competences (Cheung, 2015), evidence-based restructuring framework (Smith, 1997), and meta-theoretical analysis (Naidoo, 2013). This indicates the lack of consistency in the application of models, analytical and theoretical models.

Another issue with fragmentation concerns the lack of broad and unified theoretical and analytical frameworks that can tie together an exploration of trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions, and what implications the extent of trust may have for the nature of quality management models being implemented in Ethiopian higher education system. The researcher could find no single theory or analytical framework that combines the assessment of trust with natures of quality management models. The two themes have been addressed separately in the literature. On one hand, there is a body of literature on conceptual dimension of trust and perspectives on trust building. For instance, the study by Mishra (1996) provides a useful discussion of conceptual dimensions of trust and how they can be empirically tested in the context of an organisational study, whereas Stensaker and Maassen (2015) contributed a notable work that proposes a theoretical framework for examining trust-building mechanisms in quality assurance, albeit discussed within the context of cross-border higher education. The literature on trust suggests that little effort has been made to integrate the diverse research approaches and perspectives developed for studying trust across different disciplines (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). On the other hand, there is vast literature on quality, quality assurance and quality assurance models in higher education. Relevant literature in this regard includes higher education studies that, for example, explore the tension between the accountability and improvement purposes of quality assurance (e.g. Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Genis, 2002; Horsburgh, 1997; Kristensen, 1997, 2010; Vroeijenstijn, 1995) and reciprocity and independence between higher education institutions and external quality inspectors (Leeuw, 2002). However, there is a scarcity of literature that combines trust theories and quality assurance models, except the works such as Stensaker and Maassen (2015) that attempted to introduce theoretical views on trust building, not to quality assurance models, but to quality assurance issues in cross-border higher education. This has presented a challenge to this study.

The scarcity of relevant frameworks and fragmentation of available frameworks justifies the need for adopting concepts, theories and analytical frameworks from other the body of literature in disciplines. This required borrowing insights from

Gamson's theory of power and trust from management and organisational studies to support the linking arguments between extent of trust and corresponding measures taken to address them, which roughly connect to the fundamental differences in the nature and purposes of quality management models used in higher education. The inter-disciplinary nature of higher education enables borrowing concepts, themes, theories, models and methods from other disciplines into higher education research (Davis et al., 2005; Lincoln & Klemenčič, 2013; Macfarlane & Grant, 2012; Tight, 2010). This is further supported by an increasing number of higher education research undertaken by researchers who primarily identify themselves with other disciplines (Teichler, 2015).

Therefore, to compensate the lack of a conventional theory that fits well and underpins the conceptual and empirical analysis of the research problem, this study constructs its theoretical and analytical framework by employing a combination of four main models:

- 1) conceptual dimensions of trust
- 2) perspectives on trust building
- 3) selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust relations
- 4) quality management models

Employing a combination of these conceptual, analytical and theoretical constructs is expected to formulate the overall theoretical framework that guides and supports the empirical analysis. Such may be seen as an unorthodox approach in the field of higher education research, and questions related to reliability, compatibility of concepts and applicability of the approach may arise. However, the lack of well-established and conventional theories that would readily fit an analysis of trust relations in higher education, for instance, between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies and the implications this may have for the nature of quality management models necessitated the approach of constructing a framework by combining and linking several dimensions, models and theoretical perspectives in a manner that serves the purpose of the study. Therefore, the combination of the aforementioned models is expected to support in exploring to what extent a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions, and analysing the implications that this extent of trust may have for the nature of quality management models in use in the Ethiopian higher education.

5.2 Conceptual dimensions of trust

By expanding on the notions of trust as a one-part (i.e. proponents of the concept of 'generalised trust') and two-part relation, trust can be perceived as a three-part relation, which includes the trustor, trustee and the object of trust (Hardin, 2002). Trust as a three-part relation provides a conceptual lens for analysing the extent of trust relations between a trustor and trustee in relation to a specific matter. In a given relationship, a party that is trusting is referred to as a 'trustor' while a party to be trusted is considered as a 'trustee' (Mayer et al., 1995). In the context of this study, quality assurance agencies are considered as trustors whereas higher education institutions are treated as trustees. Quality and quality assurance in higher education constitutes the main object of trust. The object of trust does not constitute a third party or actor as trust as a three-part relation may imply; rather it is understood as an element that links the trustor and trustee. Thus, trust involves two specific parties and an object of trust. The study also, to a limited extent, reflects on mutual trust to gain an insight into how higher education institutions assess the trustworthiness of the quality assurance agency.

At the core of these three parts is the argument that trust is context-specific in nature. This entails that a specific trustor trusts a specific trustee in relation to a specific matter (Hardin, 2002). This suggests that a specific trustor do not trust all parties and may not trust the same party in relation to all matters: trusting a specific party in relation to one object may not necessarily guarantee the same trustor trusting the same party over another matter. Nor does it mean a party trusted by a specific trustor will also be trusted by other parties in relation to the same matter. When contextualised in this study, this could be interpreted to mean that the trust that a quality assurance agency may place on a specific higher education institution in relation to a specific quality assurance process may not necessarily suggest that the quality assurance agency also trusts other higher education institutions concerning the same quality assurance process. Nor does it suggest that a quality assurance agency essentially places the same level of trust in the same higher education institution regarding other external quality assurance processes. This suggests the importance of the context when exploring trust relations between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions.

The discussion presented in Chapter Two indicates that the concept of trust is highly contested (Zucker, 1986). The popularity of the concept in several disciplines contributed to it being conceptualised and applied in dissimilar ways (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996), and its perceived meaning changing over time. The existence of

competing definitions and overlapping categorisations (Kramer, 1999; Leimeister et al., 2005) and confusing trust with the factors that lead to it and its perceived outcomes (Mayer et al., 1995) create obstacles for those who strive to achieve conceptual clarity in relation to understanding what exactly constitutes trust and where its borderlines lay in relation to other similar notions (e.g. confidence, faith, cooperation, reliance) with which it has often been interchangeably used both in scholarly discussion and every day conversation. What adds to these challenges is the fact that trust is a multidimensional construct (Butler, 1991; Costa, 2003; De Boer, 2002; Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Kujala et al., 2016; Li et al., 2012; Soloduchko-Pelc, 2017). Therefore, any attempt to engage trust in depth and empirically analyse it in a given context requires describing the framework within which the concept of trust is framed and applied.

In the context of a relationship between higher education institutions and external stakeholders, trust may involve a provision of financial, legislative, political and other types of supports to higher education institutions without demanding institutions, in return, for provision of products or services and explanations for how resources are utilised (Trow, 1996). The presence of trust implies reduced regulation and controlling power, in which case accountability requirements may not be needed (De Boer, 2002; Zalec, 2013). The changing relationship between governments and higher education institutions has increasingly resulted in a growing emphasis on trust and accountability issues. The transformation has brought deregulation of direct state control, more institutional autonomy and growing demands for accountability on higher education institutions (Barrow, 1999; Gibbs, 1998; Hansen et al., 2019; Kivistö, 2007; Leveille, 2006; Neave, 1988; Trow, 1996). As a result, some of the responsibilities of governments for regulating higher education institutions are transferred to intermediary agencies, such as quality assurance agencies, which increasingly play a key role in insulating higher education institutions from central government policies (Trow, 1996) and monitoring the quality and standards of higher education institutions (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey, 2002; Neave, 1998).

When considering the context of a relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, trust may indicate a situation in which a quality assurance agency develops confidence, and relies, in the intentions, capacities and openness of higher education institutions for carrying out their core missions in manners that meet quality standards and safeguard the expectations of internal and external stakeholders, and relies on institutional commitment for putting in place internal mechanisms to regularly monitor and improve quality of operations. This

suggest that trust may entail a quality assurance agency to relinquish certain degree of its oversight, relax its coercive external monitoring and regulation on the performance of higher education institutions in quality assurance, and decentralise power and responsibility regarding quality assurance to higher education institutions. As a result, higher education institutions can exercise more institutional autonomy. Relying on trust requires a quality assurance agency to willingly become vulnerable and assume the potential risks associated with circumstances where higher education institutions may abuse or violate the trust and function in manners that compromise quality standards. As indicated in the conceptual overview of trust in Chapter Two, trust involves vulnerability and voluntarily assuming risks (Hardin, 2002; Luhmann, 1988; Mayer et al., 1995; Tway, 1994).

Empirically exploring the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions requires identifying and examining the conceptual dimensions on which trust is based. Several researchers have defined trust in different ways using a number of dimensions depending on the specific context of relationship they empirically investigated (e.g. Butler, 1991; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Mayer et al., 1995). Despite such differences, some consistencies can be identified. For instance, the conceptual discussion presented in Chapter Two indicates that the relational context involving parties, presence of risk and vulnerability, and willingness to assume risk are more commonly found in most conceptualisations of trust. Beyond such general definitions, the literature also indicates a set of conceptual dimensions that have been more widely accepted. Within the category of recent empirical literature that considers trust as a multidimensional concept, one good example of an approach that provides an analytical framework for trust in an empirical study is the work of Mishra (1996) which conceptualised trust, through a review of available definitions, in terms of four interrelated dimensions: competence, openness, concern, and reliability. This framework sees trust as the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to another on the grounds of the belief that the other party is competent, open, concerned and reliable (Mishra, 1996, p. 5). Although the study investigated the role of trust in the organisational responses to crisis, it provides a useful insight into an empirical application of an analytical framework of trust.

Other dimensions used in the literature to conceptualise trust include value congruence and task reliability (Sitkin & Roth, 1993), honesty (Baier, 1986; Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Gabarro, 1987; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; McKnight et al., 1998; Swan et al., 1988), integrity and moral character (Butler, 1991; Gabarro, 1987, 1978; Mayer et al., 1995), loyalty (Butler, 1991; Jennings, 1971), fairness and impartiality (De Boer, 2002), discretion (Gabarro, 1987), ability to make good

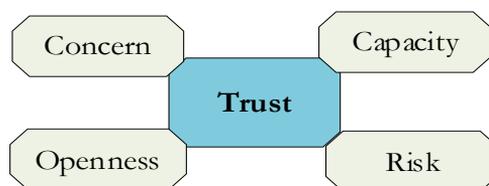
judgement and decisions (Gabarro, 1978), likeability (Swan et al., 1988) and identification and alignment with values and goals (Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001). The dimension of fairness and impartiality underscore the vital role trust plays in understanding justice (Brockner & Siegel, 1996; Saunders & Thornhill, 2004). Interestingly, Butler (1991) identified ten conditions that lead to trust through interviews and review of previous studies which, when compared to existing literature on trust, include unique elements such as discreetness, fairness, receptivity and promise fulfilment. The factors of trustworthiness may include ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995). The literature also indicates additional antecedent factors through trust and trustworthiness has been analysed including credibility of the claims of a trustee about how it will behave (Good, 1988), credibility of a trustee's promise to fulfil a trustor's expectations and a trustee's perceived credibility of the threat of punishment from a trustor if it fails to honour commitments (Dasgupta, 1988), and the nature of past interactions (Boyle & Bonacich, 1970).

The higher education literature lacks studies that comprehensively apply the aforementioned four dimensions of trust in empirical investigations. An example of exception to this is the application of the four dimensions in the analysis of faculty-administrator trust and participation in governance (Pope, 2004). A review of the application of trust in higher education studies indicate that some studies applied simple frameworks such as dimensions and forms of trust that are mainly derived from existing conceptualisations of trust (e.g. Gibbs, 1998; Pope, 2004; Vidovich & Currie, 2011). However, the four conceptual dimensions have been applied in a number of studies that assess trustworthiness in interpersonal, organisational and system relationships (Pope, 2004). This suggests the extent to which these dimensions have offered insight into a theoretical conceptualisation and empirical testing of trust across decades of research in several disciplines (Pope, 2004). Such conceptualisation reiterates the multidimensional nature of trust. Moreover, the meaning attached to these dimensions seems to overlap across the literature.

In the context of this study, the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions with the quality of education is explored using a modified set of dimensions that are mainly based on the conceptualisation of Mishra (1996). Accordingly, this study employs four major dimensions that guide the empirical investigation: concern, capacity, openness, and risk. The contents of the first three dimensions are consistent with Mishra's conceptualisation. The main difference rests on that this study avoids using reliability as a separate dimension. Instead, it adopts risk as the fourth key dimension and inherent trait of trust.

Five interrelated rationales support such an approach. First, this study sees reliability as inherently addressed, if not sufficiently implied, within the notions of concern, capacity, openness and risk. Second, this study embeds the essence of reliability mainly with the characterisation of risk and uncertainty, and to a limited extent with concern, capacity and openness. The third rationale for following such an approach is the fact that the notion of risk is commonly found in nearly all conceptualisations of trust, since trust cannot be understood without considering risk, uncertainty and vulnerability, whereas the dimension of reliability is, on relative terms, far less common and has not underpinned the conceptualisation of trust to the same scale. This is because risk is ‘an unavoidable feature of trust’ (Bachmann, 2001, p. 343), which merits inclusion if a theoretical and empirical analysis of trust is to be comprehensive. Fourth, as shown in Chapter Two, identifying and voluntarily assuming perceived risk and vulnerability crucially distinguishes trust from other similar notions such as confidence, reliance, predictability, cooperation and faith (e.g. Cook et al., 2009; Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Jalava, 2006; Leveille, 2006; Mayer et al., 1995). Fifth, despite the ‘uncontested’ relation between risk and trust, there seems to be significant gap in the literature such that existing studies in social sciences have rarely explored this conceptual relations, which leaves the useful approach of analysing possible risks involved in a relationship, as part of an investigation into trust, not fully exploited (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003, p. 551). Hence, by adopting risk as a separate dimension of trust, this study intends to contribute to the advancement of theoretical and empirical studies.

Figure 2. Conceptual dimensions of trust for exploring the trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions



In this study, the aggregation of concern, capacity, openness and risk constitute a collective assessment of the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions. These dimensions provide a useful means of exploring trust in the relationship between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions. The literature also claims that benevolence (motive), openness, reliability and competence have been prevalent across over 71 works which deal with various

issues related to the concept of trust (McKnight et al., 1998, as cited in Pope, 2004, p. 77)⁵⁰. This further underscores the validity of adopting such dimensions which have been extensively identified and applied in previous studies across various fields.

Trust is crucial since quality assurance agencies need to depend on higher education institutions to assure and improve the quality and standards of higher education. This is because the responsibility for assuring and enhancing the quality of education primarily rests in higher education institutions themselves and quality assurance agencies cannot assure and improve quality for higher education institutions. What is vital in such circumstances where a party has to depend on another to accomplish certain goals is to minimise the inherent risks involved in such relationships (Mayer et al., 1995).

The section below discusses the four dimensions of trust that guide the empirical investigation of the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions. It outlines the conceptual value of these dimensions and their operationalisation in the context of this study. The four dimensions are discussed below.

5.2.1 Concern

Concern as a dimension of trust entails that trust is established between parties where the trustor believes that the trustee refrains from behaving opportunistically or avoids from taking actions that can be harmful and contrary to the expectations of the trustor, and beyond that, where the trustee makes conscious effort to fulfil the interests and expectations of the trustor in a given context (Mishra, 1996)⁵¹. Such notion is consistent with Hardin's (2002) theorisation and conceptualisation of trust as an 'encapsulated interest', which recognises that we trust those who make efforts to act in ways that fit with our interest although they may be conflicting to their self-interests. This perspective argues that the trustee has own interest in taking the trustor's interest into account, thereby understanding trust essentially through embedding our own interest in the self-interest of those we choose to trust. The

⁵⁰ The researcher however was unable to confirm this claim through a careful review of the original source—McKnight et al. (1998).

⁵¹ The dimension of concern is sometimes referred to as benevolence (e.g. Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 1998). In addition, terms such as motive, commitment, expectation, interest, agenda, goodwill and willingness has been used in various literature to refer to concern (e.g. Butler, 1991; Cummings & Bromiley, 1996; De Boer, 2002; Gabarro, 1987; Hawley, 2014; Leimeister et al., 2005; Migliore & DeClouette, 2011; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Tyler, 2003).

encapsulated interest notion of trust also relies heavily on the existence of a compatibility of interests and moral rules between actors, which enables a trustor to rationally assess whether a trustee has its interests at heart (Hardin, 2002). The existence of shared expectations is hence vital for the development of trust (De Boer, 2002; Zucker, 1986). The dimension of concern recognises that the trustee may have self-interest but is posited that the trustee endeavours to balance it with the welfare of the trustor (Hardin, 2002; Mishra, 1996).

The consideration of interests constitutes the key component of internal inducement that make an actor to be trusted by another (Hardin, 2002). This dimension constitutes a key consideration in interpersonal, organisational and institutional settings. The assessment of expectations, concerns, motives and intentions is crucial in the establishment of trust between parties (De Boer, 2002; Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Leimeister et al., 2005; Ruokonen, 2018; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). The presence of positive expectations between a trustor and trustee (Migliore & DeClouette, 2011), compatibility of agendas (Butler, 1991; Gabarro, 1987), shared commitments (Gabarro, 1987), and the faith of a trustor in the intentions (Cook & Wall, 1980) and motives (Gabarro, 1987; Migliore & DeClouette, 2011) of a trustee enhances the trustor's propensity to trust.

Applied in this study, the dimension of concern suggests that a quality assurance agency may trust those higher education institutions who are concerned and committed for assuring and improving the quality and standards of their core operations. Assessing the perspective of a quality assurance agency and a given higher education institution on the rationale, goals and purposes that underpin quality assurance requirements, procedures and processes can give an insight into identifying the extent to which a shared concern for quality of higher education may exist. However, differences may exist between stated concerns and actual behaviour of higher education institutions. This is important since the literature indicates that higher education institutions may engage in deception and playing quality game when undergoing an external quality evaluation (e.g. Harvey, 2002; Liu, 2011; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Newton, 2002, 2002).

The literature on agency theory indicates that goal conflicts may arise in the relationship between higher education institutions and external regulatory entities such as governments due to controversy in defining goals and conflicts between official (overt) and operative (covert) goals (Kivistö, 2007; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015). Accordingly, conflicts in official goals were explained to be the function of the multiplicity of goals universities pursue, and the burden of remaining accountable to government and external stakeholders amidst the need to retain institutional

autonomy and academic freedom (Kivistö, 2007). Conflicts in operative goals were seen as rooted in the pressures universities face to demonstrate accountability and quality, on one hand, and pursue individual and institutional prestige, on the other (Kivistö, 2007). Such goal conflicts may also extend into the relationship higher education institutions have with quality assurance agencies. This could create obstacles in the development of trust between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies.

The extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts a given higher education institution may depend on its assessment of the vision and mission of the institution, core institutional values, commitment of the institution for assuring and improving the quality of education, research and community engagement, motivation of the institution for establishing internal quality assurance practices, institutional objectives set for internal quality assurance, institutional quality assurance policies and guidelines, and how the institution perceives the rationale, purpose and value of external quality evaluations. Whether a given higher education institution perceives and responds positively or negatively to quality assurance requirements and procedures may shape the perception of a quality assurance agency on the extent to which it may trust the respective institution. The assessment of concern encompasses what a quality assurance agency intends to achieve at institutional level with quality assurance requirements and what it expects higher education institutions to do to monitor quality of education and meet stated quality regulations, and what a higher education institution aims to gain from quality assurance processes. The consideration of compatibility in intentions and concerns goes hand in hand with the rational assessment of competences, openness and risks involved. A trustworthy higher education institution needs to clearly define its missions and ensure that the missions are executed effectively and with sufficient quality (Bergan, 2012).

5.2.2 Capacity

Capacity, also in some cases referred to as competence (Butler, 1991; Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Hardin, 2002; Leimeister et al., 2005; McKnight et al., 1998; Mishra, 1996; Swan et al., 1988; Tyler, 2003) and ability (Mayer et al., 1995), constitutes a major dimension based on which trust between a quality assurance

agency and higher education institutions can be explored⁵². The conceptual and theoretical value of capacity rests in the argument that a trustor, before placing its trust regarding a specific matter, rationally assesses whether the trustee adequately possesses the competence and capacity necessary for fulfilling its expectations. The capacity and competence of a trustee may include the knowledge, skills, expertise, experience, and overall resources that it has its disposal that are required for accomplishing the expectations entrusted with it. The competence levels of a trustee influence a trustor's propensity to trust (Gabarro, 1987; McKnight et al., 1998; Migliore & DeClouette, 2011; Swan et al., 1988). This constitutes a core foundation of trust (Ruokonen, 2018). Despite empirical evidence suggesting a positive association between trust and decentralisation (Mishra, 1996), such delegation and devolution of tasks and authority may threaten trust if it is not founded on a perceived congruence of intentions and sufficient competence of a given trustee. However, determining the competence of those we consider to trust is a challenging task (Hardin, 2002). The fact that the specific nature of trust is subjected to the specific parties in a relationship, characteristics of the relationship existing between these parties and particular issues over which trust is considered poses a challenge for an application of a common mechanism for assessing the extent to which those we consider to trust possess the competence to do what we expect of them.

Quality assurance agencies need to develop trust on the institutional capacities of higher education institutions for properly monitoring the quality of their operations. This requires trust in the internal institutional mission, structures, processes, procedures, goals for quality enhancement of core operations, and other key aspects higher education institutions. Trust in the internal institutional intention and capacities of higher education institutions is crucial to the process of transferring the ownership of assuring and managing quality from external quality assurance agencies to higher education institutions. This is based on the central argument that higher education institutions should be the ones who own the quality assurance process and take the primary responsibility for managing the quality of their own operations (Colling & Harvey, 1995; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Genis, 2002; INQAAHE, 2016; Kells, 1999; Kettunen, 2012; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Vroeiijstijn, 1995; Woodhouse, 2004), instead of external quality assurance agencies and networks of these agencies operating at national, regional and international levels. External quality evaluations by quality assurance agencies need to be supported with internal

⁵² This study uses the term capacity since it was seen to be more suited to encompass broader aspects of institutional resources beyond individual level experience, ability and skills than the term competence may denote.

procedures and process at higher education institutions for accountability and improvement purposes of quality assurance to be served effectively (Colling & Harvey, 1995; Genis, 2002; Thune, 1997).

In the context of the present study, this could suggest that the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts a higher education institution can be based on an assessment of the capacity of the respective institution for effectively carrying out quality assurance. Such assessment of institutional capacity may encompass an evaluation of institutional quality assurance policy and guidelines, institutional structure and organisation of units that coordinate internal quality assurance engagement, resources (financial, material and human), available quality assurance instruments and tools, support from institutional leadership to quality assurance efforts, participation of staff and students in quality assurance processes, acceptance of internal quality assurance procedures by staff and students, and other important aspects. The dimension of capacity concerns how the quality assurance agency evaluates the credibility and competence of higher education institutions in relation to fulfilling requirements for quality and standards in higher education. This extends to assessing the capacity of human resources, for instance, how many quality officers an institution has and the knowledge, skills and experience they possess for adequately guiding and coordinating internal quality assurance practices. A quality assurance agency may also pay attention to the adequacy of the financial, human and material resources, and leadership support an institution allocates to its internal quality monitoring and improvement activities. The literature shows that financial resource and its efficient management can improve the quality and standards of higher education. For instance, in her dissertation, Montanaro (2013) found positive relationship between financial performance and academic quality in universities and colleges in the US.

Moreover, the assessment of institutional capacities as a dimension of trust may encompass whether a quality assurance agency perceives significant differences in the levels of performance in quality assurance across institutions of different size and age (senior, young, newly established institutions), legal status (public, private) and institutional status (universities, university colleges, colleges). Whether a quality assurance agency sees these factors as indicators of a perceived level of overall institutional capacity for internal quality assurance could support the consideration of capacity as a dimension of trust.

5.2.3 Openness

Another dimension widely used in assessing trust and trustworthiness is openness, which can be narrowly equated with the quality of a trustee to be honest (Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Gabarro, 1987; Leimeister et al., 2005; McKnight et al., 1998; Mishra, 1996). The extent to which a given party openly and truthfully provides information to the trustor about itself, for example, about its intentions and competences, plays a crucial role in establishing its trustworthiness in the eyes of the trustor (Kramer, 1999). The establishment of open communication and exchanges is vital in the establishment of trust between parties (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996; De Boer, 2002; Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Leimeister et al., 2005). Openness and receptivity are seen as conditions that lead to trust (Butler, 1991). Trust is theorised to help decrease the propensity to withhold of information and intentional exchange of dishonest, and possibly deceiving, information, and thus may enhance a more candid sharing of undistorted information (Mishra, 1996). It is posited that openness in communication may thrive in a relationship founded on trust than within an environment characterised by widespread suspicion and mistrust. The establishment of trust, and accountability, between parties depend on the presence of telling traits (Trow, 1996). Empirical evidence shows that trust is positively related to undistorted communication between parties (Mishra, 1996). The argument posits that the more open and honest one is the trustworthy it becomes.

However, extreme openness and honesty may lead to potentially adverse consequences, where it may impair the trustworthiness of a given party rather than contributing to enhance it (Mishra, 1996). It is argued that openness about one's strengths and weaknesses underpin trust as long as one's perceived strengths outweigh weaknesses (Bergan, 2012). However, actors can be deceived by those who are skilful in filtering the behavioural sentiments they display to others, for instance by purposefully hiding negative character traits or displaying artificial dispositions, in circumstances that demand trust and cooperation (Hardin, 2002). This argument implies that we may end up trusting those who intentionally withhold information that could potentially damage their reputation and image, or those who successfully conceal their character flaws in specific circumstances. This could result in a trustor misplacing its trust. The perceived association that openness and honesty have with trust and trustworthiness may depend on specific contexts. The propensity to trust can depend on an assessment of a trustee's communication behaviour across time, contexts and culture (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Openness may also concern participation and engagement, for instance an exchange of ideas and being receptive

to suggestions (Butler, 1991; Gabarro, 1978). This suggests that openness goes hand in hand with free expression of ideas, accessibility (Jennings, 1971) and receptivity (Butler, 1991; Gabarro, 1978) between parties in a given relationship. Moreover, openness and communication play a key role both in establishing and maintaining trust. The literature suggests that trust is maintained through the support of feedback mechanisms that enable actors to continuously assess each other's intentions and behaviour, consistency between words and action, and dependability in the future (Hardin, 2002, pp. 145-150).

Applied in this study, openness as a dimension of trust is contextualised into the argument that a quality assurance agency assesses the trustworthiness of a given higher education institution on the basis of the extent to which the institution is considered to be open and honest about, for instance, its concerns for quality and quality assurance and the level of overall institutional capacity it possess for effectively carrying out its duties for quality assurance. Accordingly, a quality assurance agency may tend to trust a higher education institution that it considers to be honest in its communication concerning quality assurance processes and procedures more than an institution that it believes to intentionally engage in deception and communicating misleading information. Agency theory suggests that problems of information asymmetry arise in the relationship between higher education institutions and external regulatory bodies such as governments (Kivistö, 207; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015), thereby creating a challenge for trust building between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. The literature indicates that an actor may develop tendencies of distrust towards another due to inherent uncertainties where the actor may strategically misrepresent itself in an effort to become advantageous and present itself more appealing without mischievous intentions, and possibilities that the actor may reasonably cover and conceal its true intentions (Hardin, 2002). Openness as a dimension of trust underscores the significance of a culture of honest critical self-reflection at higher education institutions if quality assurance is to concretely support institutions in reinforcing strengths and improving areas where gaps are identified.

Accordingly, the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts a given higher education institution can depend on the assessment of how open and honest the institution is in its engagement in internal and external quality assurance processes, and its rapport with the quality assurance agency. The assessment of openness can encompass how honest and critical a higher education institution is in its self-reflection while undergoing internal and external quality evaluations. Honest reporting of institutional strengths and good practices and areas in need of

development can be a significant indication of openness of a higher education institution in the eyes of a quality assurance agency. A perceived lack of openness and honesty may require a quality assurance agency to consider whether documents are doctored, presentations orchestrated, interviews scripted, and site visits mere window-dressing. In cases of dishonest communication, neither the findings of an internal and external quality assessment may accurately reflect the status of quality and realities of institutional practice, nor may recommendations based on such erroneous assessment be pertinent to the institutional context. This may also constrain quality improvement initiatives. Moreover, the assessment of openness encompasses the mechanisms a quality assurance agency utilises to monitor whether higher education institutions are complying with quality assurance procedures and regulations. This further includes the nature of communication that exists between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions. The frequency, quality and tone of communication between a quality assurance agency and higher education institution, and channels commonly used for communication may provide an insight into the extent of openness.

However, the extent to which higher education institutions perceive a quality assurance processes as credible and useful may have implications for how open and honest they may choose to be while engaging in external and internal quality assurance evaluations. Higher education institutions may respond with a restraint, defensive and deceptive approach to quality assurance evaluation that they perceive as impartial, punitive and invasive.

The literature on trust indicates that discreetness can play a vital role in a trustee's ability to behave cautiously to retain the confidence of a trustor and avoid or hide behaviour that can potentially compromise the established confidence (Butler, 1991; Gabarro, 1978). The literature on quality assurance in higher education, as discussed in Chapter Three, indicates that higher education institutions may respond to quality assurance evaluations they perceive to be compliance oriented and intrusive with dramaturgical compliance (Barrow, 1999), 'window-dressing' (Van Damme, 2000, p. 16), impression management and playing the quality game (e.g. Baty, 1999; Frazer, 1997; Genis, 2002; Harvey, 2002; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Leeuw, 2002; Liu, 2011; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Newton, 2000, 2002). In such cases, higher education institutions may tend to overstate their strengths and conceal perceived weaknesses (Trow, 1996). Such deception, orchestrated presentations and projection of favourable impression can be interpreted as strategies that some higher education institutions employ to ensure survival and legitimacy in the face of growing pressure from quality assurance agencies, state regulation, and expectations of other external

stakeholders. Such strategies seem to be consistent, to a limited extent, with an immoral utilisation of discreetness as a basis through which trust may be obtained and maintained. As can be deduced, the notion of discreetness can be at odds, to a certain degree, with the essence of openness.

A trust that a quality assurance agency may place on a higher education institution as a product of such strategies could be a misplaced trust, established on untruthful foundations. Lack of openness can lead a quality assurance agency to trust a potentially undeserving higher education institution. Such misplaced trust can pose severe threats to the quality of higher education and render external quality requirements ineffective. The literature also indicates that the costs and consequences of misplaced trust can be dangerous, harmful and severe (Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Kramer, 1999). When trust is misplaced, including as a result of an overly optimistic assumption on the part of a trustor about the trustworthiness of a given trustee, trust can produce a risk which may result in substantial losses (Bachmann, 2001).

5.2.4 Risk

Risk and vulnerability are integral to understanding trust. As discussed in Chapter Two, the decision to assume certain degree of risk and uncertainty is widely considered to be an essential component for the concept of trust. Risk brings uncertainty of outcomes, extreme consequences and difficulties in achieving expected goals (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992; Slovic, 1993). When one party to trust another, the parties engage in ‘consensual dependence’ (Pope, 2004, p. 76), which requires the trustor to voluntarily assume some risks involved in a given interaction and confront vulnerability and uncertainties (Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999). The notion of risks and vulnerability entail voluntarily refraining from taking action while faced with circumstances where the potential for incurring loss exceeds the potential gain (Mishra, 1996).

A trustor becomes vulnerable when it relies on the intentions and behaviour of a trustee to fulfil its expectations and address its concerns, and thus willingly relinquishes controlling and inspecting the trustee. Trust involves uncertainty, fear of incurring loss and confronting the possibility of an opportunistic behaviour of a trustee whose motives and actions may not be fully controlled (Soloduch-Pelc, 2017). It is argued that ‘[t]rust always remains a bet with a chance of losing [...] a bet on the future contingent actions of others’ (Sztompka, 1999, p. 69). Hence, the

outcome of trusting a given party in relation to specific issue becomes essentially consequential to the trustor. Kramer (1999, pp. 586-594) identifies that barriers to trust mainly include distrust and suspicion, surveillance and monitoring technologies that undermine trust, breach of reciprocity and mutual obligation, and 'fragility of trust judgements'. Moreover, literature indicates that an actor may develop tendencies of distrust towards another due to inherent uncertainties related to the possibilities that the object of trust and behaviour of the actor may become inconsistent over time, and change in circumstances which may end interactions or threaten to end them or possibly change the stakes underlying interactions or fundamentally change what is at stake in the relationships (Hardin, 2002). The inextricable link trust has with specific contexts logically suggests that trust can be dynamic, in the sense that its nature and factors that help establish and maintain it may significantly change over time between actors (Kujala et al., 2016; Li et al., 2012). This can make trust risky.

As a result, a trustor assesses to what extent the trustee will remain fair, loyal and committed to fulfilling its promises (Butler, 1991), refrain from taking excessive advantages despite the availability of opportunities (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999) and demonstrates predictability (McKnight et al., 1998; Tyler, 2003) and dependability (Swan et al., 1988). Similarly, Gabarro (1987, p. 106) argues that discretion, described as 'perception that the other [trustee] would not violate confidences or carelessly divulge potentially harmful information', is crucial in the development of trust and mitigating risk. The reputation of a given trustee may also play a role in its perceived trustworthiness (De Boer, 2002). A reputation of integrity, commitment and reliability may enhance trust while reputation for breaking promises, incompetence, dishonesty and opportunistic behaviour may foster suspicion and distrust (McKnight et al., 1998). Similarly, positive stereotyping may serve to create positive trusting beliefs (McKnight et al., 1998). Confidence of a trustor in the ability (Bergan, 2012), actions (1980), behaviour (Migliore & DeClouette, 2011), and consistency of a trustee (Butler, 1991) is necessary for the establishment of a trust relation. The consideration of trustworthiness also extends to evaluating the behavioural consistency of the trustee (Gabarro, 1987), which constitutes a measure of how reliable, credible and dependable the trustee can be. Consistency between words or stated intentions and actions of a trustee can provide indications of its trustworthiness. The behavioural reliability and good faith efforts a trustee makes to honour explicit and implicit commitments to a trustor constitute critical element of trust (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996). The argument posits that a given party becomes more trustworthy in the views of others if it demonstrates

higher consistency of behaviour over a particular period of interaction (Mishra, 1996). This suggests that risk concerns the consistency, predictability and reliability of a trustee.

The trustor and trustee are aware of what can be gained and lost by engaging in a mutual dependence. The perceived level of risk and benefit for the trustor and trustee is key to the consensual engagement in a mutually trusting relation (Pope, 2004). However, the level of risk and uncertainty involved in a given interaction may affect the extent of trust. The greater the weight of the risk, the more at stake to be lost and gained, and the more critical becomes the conscious decision that a trustor has to make to rely on a trustee. Such conditions may lead to a reduction in trust (Bergan, 2012). This is because trust and uncertainty have nonlinear relationship, such that an optimal level of trust is linked to a threshold of uncertainty, where trust tends to decrease if the threshold of uncertainty is exceeded (Adobor, 2006). In the cases of higher levels of risk and uncertainty, a trustor may tend to seek validating information and pay more attention to the behaviour of the trustee, which subsequently may affect the propensity of the trustor to trust (McKnight et al., 1998). This suggests that risk and uncertainty can be functional for the emergence of trust when it remains within an optimal level. Hence, uncertainty serves as a determinant of trust and a factor that limits trust. It is argued that when uncertainty is considerably high, a trustor may require additional assurances from a trustee that its commitments will be honoured or recourse to employing formal governance instruments such as contractual agreements (Adobor, 2006). A trustor may utilise structural assurances and safeguards such as ‘regulations’, ‘guarantees’ and ‘legal recourse’ to mitigate some perceived risk with enhanced situational information, particularly at the beginning of a relationship where information about the trustee is incomplete (McKnight et al., 1998, p. 479).

Under optimal circumstances, trust provides a mechanism for dealing with such vulnerabilities since it can help reduce transaction costs and uncertainties (Bachmann, 2001; Cummings & Bromiley, 1996; Kramer, 1999; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Trust would be superfluous and unlikely to become an issue in the absence of risk, vulnerability and uncertainty (Bachmann, 2001; Hardin, 2002; Opatz & Hutchison, 1999). Trust is primarily needed to cope with such risks and diffuse uncertainties (Bachmann, 2001; Kramer, 1999; Luhmann, 1979). The existence of trust between parties may foster collaboration and cooperation, where parties depend on each other to accomplish certain outcomes in a mutually agreeable and jointly satisfying manner, with reduced fear of exploitation and betrayal (Mishra, 1996). Moreover, repeated interactions between a trustor and trustee can help reduce

information asymmetries, encourage mutual commitment, decrease the likelihood of opportunistic behaviour and exploitation, and reduce uncertainty and support the emergence of trust (Adobor, 2006). Such arguments seem to resemble Hardin's (2002) theorisation that it is in the interest of the trustor to make the present commitment of the trustee continue in the future to address the challenge of establishing future cooperation on the grounds of trust between parties.

When contextualised in this study, the level of trust a quality assurance agency develops in its engagement with a higher education institution in quality assurance processes depends on identifying, weighing and voluntarily assuming the risks at stake. This involves examining the interest of governments, ministerial offices responsible for governing higher education, quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders in regulating higher education institutions. What such regulation aims to achieve, encourage or deter could provide an insight into the risks that arise in the absence of external and internal mechanisms of quality monitoring. The consideration of risks and uncertainties in the relationship between a quality assurance agency and higher education institution may encompass scenarios of what the state of quality in a given institution would be if there would be no requirements for accreditation, quality audits and self-evaluation or if a quality assurance agency and internal systems of quality monitoring did not exist.

The understanding of risk and uncertainty would also be expected to account for whether higher education institutions would voluntarily operate in a responsible manner and remain committed on their own volition to safeguard the quality of education, research and community service they provide. The perceived trustworthiness of the institutional commitment and capacities of higher education institutions to assume responsibility for managing their own quality is vital. In such regard, a key risk and uncertainty is the probability that higher education institutions may not effectively manage their own quality and the potential damages to the quality, credibility and accountability of higher education at national and institutional level. A quality agency assesses to what extent a higher education institution refrains from operating in ways that negatively affect, circumvent or violate stated quality regulations for which it has the mandate to enforce. This also concerns how a quality assurance agency responds to those higher education institutions that it finds violating and disregarding quality regulations, operating in ways that adversely affected quality, and failing to implement recommendations given in external quality reviews.

As the theoretical discussion presented above indicates, a quality assurance agency may place its trust in a higher education institution as long as the risks and

uncertainties posed for quality and wellbeing of stakeholders remains relatively low or moderate. However, if the risk involved in engaging with a higher education institution are perceived to be high, a quality assurance agency may have a reduced propensity to trust the institution. In such scenarios, a quality assurance agency may tend to closely monitor higher education institutions through periodic mechanisms of quality evaluations and, in some cases, conducting surprise visits to further arrest suspicious activities and ensure enforcement of quality regulations. In contrast, it is argued that a 'lighter-touch quality accountability' may tend to be experienced by 'less-risky' institutions (King, 2015 p. 496)⁵³. Moreover, literature suggests that 'trust builds on a perception of quality', such that higher education institutions that the public perceives to deliver quality education and research tend to be trusted more than those higher education institutions that are seen to lack quality (Bergan, 2012, p. 53). This suggests that the perception of quality may inform trust in the context of higher education. Additionally, the role of quality in trust has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Baert & Shipman, 2005; Elassy, 2015; Harvey, 2011; Huber, 2013; Jacobs, 2010; Okebukola, 2014; Schindler et al., 2015; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Trow, 1996; Van Damme, 2002; Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016).

Assessing the overall level of trust by aggregating the four dimensions

The central argument underpinning the conceptual dimensions of trust appeals strongly to the multidimensional (Costa, 2003; Hardin, 2002; Kujala et al., 2016; Li et al., 2012) and multiconditional nature of trust (Butler, 1991), and that the combination of these four interrelated dimensions constitute an overall assessment of trust. In this study, trust is mainly conceptualised as a multidimensional construct. The scope of the empirical analysis is confined to analysing trust in the context of inter-organisational relationship, where higher education institutions interact with a quality assurance agency on the task of assuring and enhancing quality in higher education. This approach becomes useful for understanding the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions. Quality assurance agencies as major external actors guide, monitor and influence the quality assurance practices of higher education institutions, through their demands, for instance, for

⁵³ King (2015, p. 496-497) discusses the emergence of a 'risk-based regulation' governmental policy in England that seeks to rebalance the proportions of accountability and institutional autonomy by countering the negative effects of accountability with a selective application of risk-taking approaches.

legitimacy, transparency, competency and reliability. Trust promotes the development of an environment conducive for enhancing decentralised decision-making, undistorted communication and collaboration.

In addition to the view that trust is a combined product of the four conceptual dimensions, there seems to be a wider consensus regarding how a relative dominance of some dimensions and inconsistencies across the levels of each dimension may affect an overall level of trust. It is theorised that if one or more dimensions are perceived to be lower than others, the overall level of trust would be reduced (e.g. Pope, 2004). There would be negative overall trust even though three of the dimensions are perceived positively, but the last dimension ranks low. It could be possible for one actor to trust another, for instance, based on competence and concern but not in openness, hence resulting in a low overall trust (Mishra, 1996). This shows that no fewer than four positively ranked dimensions would be sufficient for a relationship based on trust to emerge. When the level of one trust dimension is reduced, it is likely for this to negatively affect the levels of related constructs, which subsequently makes trusting intentions fragile (Bergan, 2012; Kramer, 1999; Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017; McKnight et al., 1998).

Trusting intentions of a trustor may become fragile in contexts where there is a combination of low and high dimensions or when only a single dimension ranks high while others are at low level. In contrast, the propensity of a trustor to trust a given trustee will likely be high when all the dimensions consistently exist at high levels, hence forming a strong combination of dimensions. Therefore, it would be necessary for all dimensions to be perceived consistently and positively for trust to be established. Such theorisations seem to imply that a positive overall level of trust is only possible where all individual dimensions are perceived positively. Additionally, the trusting intention of a given trustor is likely to be robust, rather than fragile, under conditions of consistent and 'adequate antecedent support', presence of 'belief-confirming cognitive mechanisms' and information, and establishment of social interactions and 'social mechanisms' (McKnight et al., 1998, p. 483). Moreover, this study argues that generalisations can be problematic, and further posits that the relationship between each individual dimension and overall level of trust may depend on the specific context of relationship, nature of the trustor and trustee involved, the relative importance these parties attach to each dimension, and object of trust.

Moreover, higher education institutions also need to have trust in the pivotal role that quality assurance agencies play in coordinating, supporting and monitoring institutional efforts directed at improving quality standards in higher education.

Trust in the legitimacy, autonomy, organisational capacity, validity and appropriateness of quality management methods, objective and ideological paradigm, mode of operation, and a number of other issues concerning quality assurance agencies can influence their relationship with higher education institutions.

To sum up, trust is conceptualised, through a review of available definitions and theoretical and empirical applications of the concept. The study employs four interrelated dimensions: concern, capacity, openness and risk. Accordingly, this study sees trust as the willingness of a quality assurance agency to be vulnerable to a higher education institution on the grounds that a given higher education institution shares the concerns of the quality assurance agency for the quality of higher education, has overall institutional capacity necessary for fulfilling expectations for monitoring the quality of its operations as directed by the quality assurance agency, conducts honest critical self-evaluations and engages in open communication with the quality assurance agency, and the quality assurance agency is willing to assume some degree of risk and uncertainty associated with relinquishing strict monitoring and control of a higher education institution. Despite not adopted as a separate dimension of trust, the legal status of higher education institutions can provide useful additional insight to the analysis of trust, at least in the context of quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education. Whether a given higher education institution is a public or private entity seems to considerably affect the fundamental approach of the country's national quality assurance agency to institutions⁵⁴. The central argument underpinning the use of the conceptual dimensions of trust as an element of an analytical framework appeals to the multidimensional nature of trust, and that the combination of these four interrelated dimensions constitute an overall assessment of trust.

Finally, it would be relevant to acknowledge that most frameworks comprising sets of conceptual dimensions, constructs, conditions and antecedents of trust were developed in the 1970s (e.g. Gabarro, 1978; Luhmann, 1979), 1980s (e.g. Barber, 1983; Gabarro, 1987; Swan et al., 1988) and 1990s (e.g. Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 1998; Mishra, 1996), and as a result, their application in contemporary contexts may require some revision and updating. First, this study reconsidered the suitability of the terms used to refer to some of these dimensions. For example, the study selected the term capacity instead of competence and ability to more appropriately encompass overall institutional capacity for monitoring quality of education, and adopts the term concern rather than intention and motive to capture the perceived

⁵⁴ More discussion on this issue can be found in Chapter Six, particularly in sections 6.2.1 and 6.5, Chapter Eight, section 8.5.1 and Chapter Nine, section 9.1.3.

purpose and commitment for quality and fulfilling quality assurance requirements. Second, the study reconsidered the relevance of each of the four conceptual dimensions widely applied in previous studies and proposed by Mishra (1996). Accordingly, the study retained three dimensions (concern, capacity and openness) and added a new dimension (risk and uncertainty). It avoided using reliability as a separate dimension and, instead, embedded its key essence mainly with the characterisation of risk and uncertainty and, to a limited extent, with concern, capacity and openness. Third, the study attempts to support the conceptual dimensions of trust with other theoretical models such as perspectives on trust building, selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust, and quality management models. The justification for doing so is that beyond guiding the exploration of the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions, the conceptual dimensions have little capacity to analyse what implications the extent of trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions could have for quality management models. This necessitated the study to construct a theoretical and analytical framework which combines the analysis of the two aspects. Another issue with the conceptual dimensions besides the need for updating it could be the challenges of reconfiguring it to the context of higher education. Although the dimensions of trust have been widely applied in other disciplines, there is scant experience in applying them in theoretical and empirical studies within the field of higher education (Pope, 2004). This creates some challenges in contextualising and operationalising the dimensions of trust in a manner that is suitable for investigating issues in higher education such as quality assurance.

While the conceptual dimensions of trust are employed to explore the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions in relation to quality and quality assurance, the analysis of what implications that the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions may have for quality management models are supported with a combination of perspectives on trust building in quality assurance, insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust and quality management models in higher education. These theoretical and analytical models are discussed in the following sections.

5.3 Perspectives on trust building in quality assurance

This section extends the discussion on the conceptual dimensions of trust to an account of the perspectives on trust building in quality assurance, through a review of relevant literature that address theoretical views on how trust is built and maintained and those that offer theoretical perspectives for analysing trust building in quality assurance in higher education. Due to scarcity of literature that provide well-developed conceptual and theoretical insights on trust in the field of higher education, as indicated in Chapter One, Four and the beginning of this chapter, this study will exhaustively utilise two available key works. These are an article titled ‘A conceptualisation of available trust-building mechanisms for international quality assurance of higher education’ by Bjørn Stensaker and Peter Maassen published in 2015, and a book chapter on the title ‘The ingredients of trust in European higher education’ by Bjørn Stensaker and Charlotte Petri Gornitzka published in 2009. Some useful insights from these works are adopted and contextualised to the settings of this study to help analyse what implications that the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions may have for quality management models in higher education.

Despite some common elements identified across the diverse conceptualisations of trust proposed by several researchers, as indicated in Chapter Two, different theoretical views exist on how trust is perceived and built (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). The literature tends to see trust and trust building through two fundamentally two contrasting images: trust built through calculative and instrumentalist approaches and trust emerging from shared norms, values, expectations, experience and identity (e.g. Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Kuo & Yu, 2009; Lander & Kooning, 2013; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Li et al., 2012; Zucker, 1986)⁵⁵. Similarly, as suggested in the conceptual and theoretical analysis presented in the works of Stensaker and Maassen (2015) and Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009), trust can be looked at from such two broad perspectives in the context of quality assurance in higher education. Accordingly, the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective and normative-cognitive perspective accounts for how trust can be developed between a given set of stakeholders. These perspectives support the empirical analysis of the implications that the extent of trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education

⁵⁵ The former appears to suggest that trust can be developed swiftly (e.g. Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; McKnight et al., 1998), whereas the latter recognises that building and maintaining trust requires considerable length of time and consistent interaction and familiarity (e.g. Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Such contesting theorisations on the development of trust can be found in several literature (e.g. Kuo & Yu, 2009).

institutions may have for quality management models. Accordingly, the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective offers insight into the tendency of actors to use control, compliance and regulation mechanisms for building trust in interactions where trust between actors is perceived to be lacking, broken or has weaker foundations. In contrast, the normative-cognitive perspective provides useful theoretical insights which suggest that actors, rather than employing control and regulation, may tend to focus on building trust through identifying shared patterns of values and norms, where the conditions that enable trust are perceived to be stronger. Through these discussions, the rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive perspectives help link the overall level of trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions, as a sum of concern, capacity, openness and risk dimensions, with the approaches that may inform the quality management model that a quality assurance agency employs on higher education institutions. The section below presents the two perspectives on trust building and discusses the insights they offer in the context of quality assurance in higher education and relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions.

5.3.1 Rationalist-Instrumentalist perspective

The rationalist-instrumentalist perspective theorises that trust can be built through enforcing compliance to regulations, procedures and standards, with the assistance of control and incentive instruments (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Drawing on the theoretical models proposed by Bachmann and Inkpen (2011), Stensaker and Maassen (2015) argue that legal regulations and certification constitute the major trust building mechanisms that are considered to be consistent with the basic tenets of the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective. It is posited that, based on their relative degrees of consequences, legal regulations provide a hard instrument while certification forms a soft instrument of trust building.

The logic of consequentiality constitutes the basic assumption underpinning the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective in understanding and building trust (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). The perspective tends to assume that a trustee will be normally drawn to pursuing its self-interests. A trustee assesses the potential benefits and consequences of pursuing its self-interests vis-à-vis fulfilling the expectations of a trustor. Accordingly, a trustee may tend to engage in behaviour that breach trust if the benefits of pursuing one's self-interests are

perceived to outweigh the consequences of breaking a trustor's commitments. In the cases where a trustee perceives that it is in its best interest to honour a given trust placed on it than maximise its self-interests, a trustee may tend to refrain from taking advantage of a trustor's confidence. It is theorised that self-interests can be expected and, at times considered, legitimate at some stages of an interaction (Zucker, 1986).

The rationalist-instrumentalist perspective on trust building seems to be underpinned by an economic perspective, which focuses on calculative thinking rooted in considering the advantages and disadvantages of trusting another party in a given interaction, and mechanisms to maximise gains and minimise loss (Leimeister et al., 2005; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Zucker, 1986). Trust involves actors making rational calculations for maximising expected gains and minimising expected loss (Kramer, 1999). Such notions are found to be consistent with, for instance, 'calculative or instrumental trust' (De Boer, 2002) and 'calculative-trust antecedents' (Li et al., 2012). Reason is seen as an important foundation for trust (Sztompka, 1999). Trust is, hence, argued to be driven by calculated assessment of perceived risk and instrumental motives (Bachmann, 2001; Kramer, 1999). Trustworthiness, in the context of an instrumental and calculative approaches to trust, is linked to the beliefs about the extent to which one receives positive and favourable outcomes from a given interaction (De Boer, 2002).

Furthermore, a functional account on the development and maintenance of trust enables to understand that the main incentive for actors to be initially trustworthy towards others in casual encounters is to later benefit from a potential mutual cooperation, which would become possible if the relationship grows into a repeated and ongoing exchange (Hardin, 2002). Such assumptions resemble the viewpoints of rational choice theory of social behaviour. As can be noted, the understanding of trust as a rational choice orientation (Kramer, 1999) seems to relate, to some degree, to the economic perspective of trust production (Zucker, 1986) and rationalist-instrumentalist perspective of trust building (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Additionally, the tenets of rationalist-instrumentalist perspective seem to be consistent with 'institution-based trust antecedents', which posit that actors develop trust over others as a result of reliance on rules and other external impersonal socio-economic structures that motivate, sanction and regulate certain behaviour in specific contexts (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Li et al., 2012; McKnight et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986). Such views bear resemblance to the notion of 'deterrence-based trust' (Adobor, 2006).

Due to the perceived natural tendency of a trustee to pursue its self-interests establishing trust becomes challenging without the support of control and incentive

instruments that assist in regulating the behaviour of a trustee. The rationalist-instrumentalist perspective posits that trust can be achieved through effective incentives that encourage a trustee to honour expectations and commitments entrusted with it and refrain from maximising its self-interests (Massy, 2011). When internal motivations of a trustee are perceived to lack reliability, compliance to commitments can be achieved through the forces of institutional devices and legal regulations (Hardin, 2002). In addition, formal control mechanisms depend on specification of expectations held of actors, possibility of monitoring to assess the extent of compliance and deviance of actors from agreed rules, and enforcement of rules and contracts with credible threat of punishment (Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005; Massy, 2011). The ability to enforce instruments of authority and control through the use of punishments determines the effectiveness of such devices (McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 2006). Other variables include, such as those proposed by Massy (2011) that include the 'salience of the rewards and punishments', 'power of the measures used to allocate the rewards and punishments' and 'alignment [of the accountability scheme] with institutional goals and culture' (p. 232-233). Trust is, thus, built through punishment or deterrence against violations of commitments and incentives that encourage behaviour that conform to the expectations of the trustor (Massy, 2011). This seems to make rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms of trust building more pro-active, interventionist and behaviourist (Massy, 2011; Stensaker & Gronitzka, 2009).

The use of such 'stick and carrot' mechanisms is theorised to help a trustor build trust and interdependence with a trustee (Massy, 2011; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015, p. 32). In fact, Bachmann (2001, p. 343) notes that legal norms have the capacity to 'direct the expectations of social actors to certain routes of behaviour, long before sanctions are seriously considered by those who feel betrayed and might want to take recourse to legal action'. The use of robust systems of law such as legal regulations, contract laws and other types of constraints can provide a strong incentive for a given actor to remain (Hardin, 2002). It is argued that legal regulations enable actors to align their expectations (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011). Such mechanisms are needed to safeguard the trustor's concerns, expectations, interests and motives against the potential self-interests of a trustee.

Without the use control and incentive mechanism, the breach of trust may incite a reaction of confusion, shock, anger, betrayal, anxiety and embarrassment on the part of the trustor (Hawley, 2014; Mishra, 1996; Zucker, 1986). However, the speed in which trust is destroyed and plummets into distrust may depend on a consideration of two key elements: the magnitude of the damage inflicted on trust

and the extent to which this was perceived intentional (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017, p. 133). This suggests a more rapid deterioration to distrust where the damage to trustworthiness is perceived to be severe and intentional. In such cases, a broken trust leads to disappointment and suspicion which subsequently results in distrust (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017).

Trust can be formed and sustained using formal rules when shared understandings of behavioural standards and reciprocal confidence in the socialisation and adherence to such normative mechanisms and socialisation is perceived to be low (Kramer, 1999). Formal mechanisms of building and sustaining trust are needed when mutual trust is no longer taken-for-granted between actors. The need for formal mechanisms of trust production such as legislations, contracts and insurances arise when trust formed through informal mechanisms is unavailable, broken, or a disruption of expectations and trust is suspected (Sitkin & Roth, 1993; Zucker, 1986). As such, the standards and requirements that regulations create replace trust. In such situations, Stensaker and Maassen (2015) argue that power replaces trust. In such cases, rules provide grounds for granting trust (Sztompka, 1999). In the context of higher education, the adoption and increasing reliance on formal quality assurance requirements indicates that 'external accountability replaces mutual trust between stakeholders' (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016, p. 15). Drawing on an economic perspective, trust can be understood as an 'implicit contracting', which is seen as a 'simple replacement for a written contract' (Zucker, 1986). Such formal mechanisms used in creating trust are founded on institutionalised understandings that have become widely shared 'objective' and 'rule-like' expectations of characters that are repeatable by other actors and can be formally stated without the need to adapt or alter them to each actor (Zucker, 1986). Formal hierarchy and rational bureaucratic structure, legislation, written rules, regulation and other formal mechanisms can be employed to produce trust. The use of formal mechanisms for trust building seem more appropriate in complex impersonal settings, engaging with wider groups of actors, and modern societies (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Zucker, 1986).

The literature also identifies the value of using third parties as conduits of trust by conveying and amplifying the expectations between a trustor and trustee (Kramer, 1999). The role of quality assurance agencies as intermediaries between state and higher education institutions can be interpreted as a third-party conduit of trust and accountability between the national and institutional levels (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). Stensaker and Maassen (2015) claim that one of the common outcomes of implementing legal regulations in the context of quality assurance in higher education

can be the establishment of quality assurance agencies, which operate with autonomous or quasi-autonomous status, with mandates for enforcing regulations and monitoring quality and standards of higher education institutions. This saw the expansion of quality assurance agencies in several countries, a process labelled as 'agencification' by Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009). Significant progress has been made over the last two decades in establishing regional and continental networks of quality assurance agencies that facilitate exchange of experience, promote comparability of procedures, and regulate quality standards. However, it is also acknowledged that third parties may communicate incomplete, indirect, and, in some cases, biased information between the trustor and trustee (Kramer, 1999). The use of third parties and agents may hide asymmetric power relations, such that agencies are often set up by one party to regulate and control another party, but agencies rarely exercise equal level of control on both parties engaged in the relationship (Hardy et al., 1998; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

Applying insights from a rationalist-instrumentalist perspective in the context of this study may imply that higher education institutions may have self-interests, for example profit maximisation, ensuring survival and legitimacy, which could be at odds with quality and standards of higher education. In such cases, higher education and external stakeholders can be at crossroads (Leveille, 2006), since a considerable external interest exists in the performance and quality of higher education institutions. The higher education literature also indicates that higher education institutions may have overt and covert goals which may conflict with the goals of external stakeholders (Kivistö, 2007; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015), engage in opportunistic behaviour at the risk of interests and demands of stakeholders (De Boer, 2002; Kivistö, 2007; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015) and play the quality game and develop superficial commitment to quality (Barrow, 1999; Dill, 1998; Genis, 2002; Leeuw, 2002; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Newton, 2000, 2002; Van Damme, 2000; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). A suspicion of possible deception, violation of expectations, insincerity and untrustworthiness, and presence of ulterior motives may tend to make actors to demand more information about a trustee, avoid hasty judgements, and put effort into making a careful consideration and analysis of information regarding the motives and behaviour of trustees (Kramer, 1999). Regulatory and incentive instruments are, therefore, needed to ensure that higher education institutions function in responsible and lawful ways, and assure the quality of the education, research and community service they provide. Governments and other external stakeholders are interested in retaining a substantial degree of regulatory control to ensure quality and standards when the trust on higher education

institutions to guarantee quality is eroded (Jackson, 1998). The literature indicates a trend of growing reliance on formal and explicit accountability and instruments of quality assurance (Power, 1997; Salter & Tapper, 2000). Traditional forms of trust in higher education are increasingly giving way to instrumental mechanism with stronger legal basis (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009) and growing demands for demonstrating trust (Power, 1997). Moreover, Stensaker and Maassen (2015) identify the pattern that the rationalist-instrumentalist mechanism of trust building tends to more actively involve the participation of public authorities and quality assurance agencies that are publicly funded and managed. This suggests that the role of statutory quality assurance agencies may tend to be more pronounced in rationalist-instrumentalist perspective of trust building. Rules, standards and procedures provide instruments for controlling and regulating the behaviour of higher education institutions (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms may also include operating rules, funding formulas, performance indicators and various types of external evaluations (Massy, 2011). These instruments provide deterrence against violation of quality regulations and incentive for higher education institutions to uphold quality standards and remain committed to operating responsibly. Such mechanisms that regulate and control behaviour, enforce regulations and established requirements, promote compliance to standards and terms of contracts are employed to minimise perceived risks and avoid adverse consequences that could be caused by broken trust in working relationships that require interdependence between parties (Mayer et al., 1995). However, the emphasis such approaches place on maintaining consistency and predictability may constrain creativity and innovativeness, given the rapid changes and transformations taking place in higher education (Bachmann, 1998; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

Accordingly, the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective may imply that a quality assurance agency establishes trust in higher education institutions through the assessment of the extent to which they adhere to quality regulations, follow established procedures for assuring and enhancing quality and conform to defined quality standards (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). External quality assessments involving self-evaluation, peer review and site visits allow higher education institutions to demonstrate conformity to quality standards to quality assurance agencies, government ministries and other external stakeholders. Higher education institutions need to prove and demonstrate that they have put in place an effective quality assurance system in order to earn the trust of key internal and external stakeholders (Domnica & Talmacean, 2013). As such, higher education

institutions need to persuade external stakeholders such as governments and quality assurance agencies that they can be trusted to safeguard the interests and expectations of the constituents that they serve (Jackson, 1998). Trust holds a central place in the quality assurance of higher education (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016) and for proper functioning of higher education institutions (Trow, 1996; Vidovich & Currie, 2011; Zalec, 2013).

In most countries, the declining trust of government, ministries, quality assurance agencies and other external stakeholders in higher education institutions has led to the increasing compliance requirement to control instruments that include, such as (Spier, 2013, p. 17):

[...] rules, regulations, recommendations, protocols, audits, reviews, inspections, assessments, referees, evaluations, league tables and benchmarks. [...] They create an atmosphere of compliance. Deviance and experimentation are shunned. Adherence to teaching protocols, curriculum topics, and examination rules and regulations is required. Trust is clearly at low ebb.

Such systems create power imbalance such that the power to define quality, set quality assurance policies and regulations, determine quality standards, prescribe procedures and monitor implementation of quality assessment tend to accumulate in the hands of external stakeholders such as governments, ministries and quality assurance agencies (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016).

In the context of the relationship between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies, control and incentive mechanisms for building trust on quality can encompass several components. These may include the national and institutional legislations governing quality and standards, formal criteria for granting degrees and qualifications, requirements for setting up internal institutional structures for coordinating quality assurance activities, requirements for developing systematic policies and procedures for internal quality monitoring, legal requirements for undergoing institutional and programme pre-accreditations, full-accreditations and accreditation renewals, requirements for fulfilling institutional and programme quality audits, requirements for producing self-evaluation reports, reporting requirements to quality assurance agencies and ministries regarding academic performances, and requirements for reporting to stakeholders about the status of quality and institutional efforts made to assure and enhance quality standards. Higher education institution that go through periodic internal and external quality evaluations increase their credibility and trustworthiness (Bergan, 2012). In addition to carrying out periodic external quality evaluations, quality assurance agencies, in some countries such as Ethiopia, may conduct surprise or unannounced inspections

of higher education institutions, particularly as a response to suspicious activities and alerting from concerned stakeholders.

Stensaker and Maassen (2015) propose that certifications, such as International Organization Standardization (ISO) certifications, benchmarks, databases and performance indicators, provide a softer instrument of trust building in quality assurance. Another example, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) provides a register of trustworthy quality assurance agencies in European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on degree of compliance with Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in EHEA. The EQAR also comprises a database of higher education institutions and programmes that have undergone external quality assurance. Several countries have also developed National Qualifications Frameworks to systematically enhance the quality of education and training. The use of standards and guidelines, qualification frameworks and register and databases are seen as rationalist-instrumentalist instruments for employed to build trust in higher education at national and international levels, including trust among quality assurance agencies (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). Moreover, quality assurance agencies often sanction higher education institutions upon conducting an external quality assessment. For example, quality assurance agencies issue certification of accreditation and quality labels valid for a given number of years until the next periodic review. The aforementioned and other types of certifications generally imply that ‘certain standards are met or procedures followed’, thereby influencing the expectations and behaviour of stakeholders engaged in the process of quality assurance in higher education (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015, p. 33).

Moreover, organisational and institutional arrangements enable trust building (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Bringing such views to the context of a relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions may indicate that organisational arrangements such as the establishment of internal structures and processes of quality assurance, institutional management, established instruments and lines of accountability, and internal stakeholders (demands, roles and engagement of staff and students) offer mechanisms for internally regulating quality standards at higher education institutions. Institutional arrangements such as policies, regulations, quality standards and criteria, professional codes of ethics and professional associations provide instruments of external regulations. Previous studies that used a combination of contingency theory and institutional theory, such as Kahsay (2012) and Geda (2014), showed that organisation-specific factors (e.g. institutional leadership and governance, organisational complexity such as size and

age, academic staff and students, and institutional quality culture) and external environmental factors (including political-legal frameworks, regulators, suppliers, and socio-cultural factors) play vital role in enabling and hindering the development of quality at higher education institutions.

The rationalist-instrumentalist perspectives on building trust seem to emphasise the use of relatively strict control tools by the trustor, thus seemingly presupposing an existence of relatively weaker foundations for internal processes of trust building on the side of the trustee in the absence of external instruments of validation. This suggests higher education institutions may be driven by self-interests, such as profit-maximisation and ensuring institutional survival, which may neglect or compromise quality, which can further create a barrier for a quality assurance agency and other external stakeholders to readily place their trust on the commitment and capacity of higher education institutions for safeguarding the quality of their core operations. Accordingly, the perception of suspicious concern and commitment for quality, inadequate institutional capacity for safeguarding quality, lack of honest critical self-reflection and prevalence of deception in quality assurance processes, and high risk and threat to quality of higher education may create weak propensity for quality assurance agency to trust higher education institutions. The sum of these may imply weaker trust foundations within higher education institutions as seen from the perspective of a quality assurance agency. Such weak trust foundations may encourage a quality assurance agency to place emphasis, through mandates granted to it by provisions stipulated in legislations, on enforcing strict quality regulations and ensuring compliance of higher education institutions to defined minimum quality standards. Through such approaches, a quality assurance agency attempts to prevent irresponsible operations that may endanger quality and standards in higher education institutions. Therefore, the use of control and incentive instruments become crucial in establishing trust with higher education institutions. Such instruments play a role in building and maintaining trust between higher education institutions and stakeholders involved in quality assurance processes. Applied in this study, the insights from the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective on trust building suggest that higher education systems where external stakeholders have low trust in higher education institutions may tend to enforce quality management practices through quality assurance agencies that rely on enforcing strict quality regulations and requirements on higher education institutions to ensure their compliance with stated standards and accountability to stakeholders.

The literature shows a trend of growing accountability requirements in higher education (e.g. Barrow, 1999; Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Hansen et al., 2019;

Kivistö, 2007; Leveille, 2006; Neave, 1988). The gradual shift in the role of governments from a regulative to a more supervisory character brought increased autonomy to higher education institutions, and subsequently an increasing demand for ensuring internal and external accountability in higher education institutions (Trow, 1996), and emphasis on output monitoring (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Enders, 2013), through for instance the use of performance agreements (Salmi et al., 2017) and performance-based funding (Hansen et al., 2019; Kivistö, 2007; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). On the other hand, a trend of declining public trust in higher education (Amaral et al., 2009; Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Bird, 2013; Bok, 1992; Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Cheng, 2012; Elton, 1986; Enders, 2013; Engwall & Scott, 2013; Harvey, 1995; McKelvey, 2013; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016; Spier, 2013; Van Damme, 2002; Weingart, 2013; Zumeta, 2011) accounts, in part, for the growing demands to hold higher education institutions accountable for the quality of their education, research and community engagement. Therefore, quality assurance procedures and practices form an integral part of the broader accountability instruments implemented in higher education (Massy, 2011; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011a, 2011b) that serve to hold higher education institutions accountable to stakeholders and the public.

However, the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective and its preference for formal control and regulation mechanisms as major instruments for building and maintaining trust have criticisms. It can be time and resource consuming to regulate, inspect and check the compliance of higher education institutions and ascertain the accuracy of information (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Legal regulations are often considered emotive and controversial (Jackson, 1998) and rigid/harder instruments (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015), and may infringe on the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions. The rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms have been also perceived as 'hierarchical, manipulative and disempowering' (Massy, 2011, p. 228). The formal instruments of trust production can be inefficient and cumbersome and, thus, become imperfect substitutes for trust (Zucker, 1986). Legalistic remedies for trust, such as contracts and agreements, are criticised for often having limited effectiveness, despite their potential to attain organisational legitimacy (Mayer et al., 1995). Other criticised that such mechanisms tend to be more suited to addressing reliability concerns regarding trust violations but ignore and lack the capacity to respond to concerns related to value congruence between actors involved in an interaction (Sitkin & Roth, 1993). Formal mechanisms of building trust can de-institutionalise underlying informal mechanisms such as expectations of reciprocity (Zucker, 1986). Additionally,

increasing reliance on legalistic remedies of trust could 'lead to an 'inflationary spiral' of increasingly formalised relations' between actors (Sitkin & Roth, 1993, p. 367). Moreover, surveillance and performance monitoring technologies can, in practice, undermine trust and, in some cases, can produce unintended consequences or elicit destructive behaviour they are meant to prevent among trustees such as deception and sabotage, and weaken their intrinsic motivation and spread fear (Kramer, 1999). This suggests that instruments designed to guarantee trust could in practice make building and sustaining trust more difficult. Since trust is elusive to achieve, enforcing more oversight, control and inducements may make actors less trusted (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). As such, imposing more governance arrangements and requirements are not sufficient for building and sustaining trust (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

5.3.2 Normative-Cognitive perspective

The normative-cognitive perspective postulates that trust can be built on the basis of shared norms, values and patterns of structures (De Boer, 2002; Massy, 2011; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011b; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015)⁵⁶. Trust is founded through strong social values, norms and customs that are taken-for-granted by actors and play a key role guiding behaviour (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Zucker, 1986). By linking their theoretical analysis with the mechanisms and processes of trust building identified by Bachmann and Inkpen (2011), Stensaker and Maassen (2015) argue that reputation and the establishment of community of norms, structures and procedures form the major trust building mechanisms that relevant in the normative-cognitive perspective. These works consider reputation as a hard instrument and the development of shared norms, structures and procedures as soft instrument of trust building when compared based on the degree of their consequences. Examples of systematic applications of these trust building instruments in quality assurance seems to be scarce (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015).

Further, Massy (2011) considers persuasion a means through which the trustor can hold the trustee accountable and trustworthy⁵⁷. Accordingly, it was theorised that the use of this instrument involves persuading the trustee that: (a) the concerns

⁵⁶ Hirsch (1997) justified combining normative and cognitive forms of trust, despite seen as separable in a strict analytical sense, by the challenges of maintaining such a distinction in empirical testing, which creates the difficulty of ascertaining whether a given trusting behaviour can be concretely attributed to a normative or cultural element, or both (as cited in Stensaker and Gornitzka, 2009).

⁵⁷ This was originally theorised in the context of an economic principal-agent relationship.

and objectives of the trustor are worthwhile and, thus, need to be embraced; and (b) disregarding, harming and abusing or failing to observe these expectations would be detected and punished and eventually prove dysfunctional and disadvantageous in the long run (despite temporarily appearing to be attractive) (Massy, 2011, p. 227). This strategy of persuasion is shared by the normative-cognitive perspective and the Gamson's theory's category of high trust relations between actors.

The existence of shared patterns of values and norms suggest the existence of common understanding between actors concerning which activities constitute acceptable and harmful behaviour, which creates less demand for the use of control, compliance and regulation instruments to ensure that actors refrain from disregarding commitment, breaching trust and disrupting expectations of mutual reciprocity in an interaction. Formal mechanisms of building and sustaining trust are less likely needed, as shared expectations, values and norms have become taken-for-granted and they enhance mutual confidence that commitments will be honoured. The internalisation of strong values, norms and rules by all actors also means that it is expected for everyone to understand what constitutes appropriate behaviour and adhere to these norms (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Hence, shared patterns values, customs and norms of behaviour replace control and regulations. Actors rely more on social pact rather than legal contracts (Olsen, 2007), since a stronger and inherent alignment of interests and norms between actors enables an actor to be seen as trustworthy in the eyes of another (Hardin, 2002). The literature further indicates that trust develops between actors who identify with each other's values and goals (Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001). Moreover, the principles of forgiveness, generosity, and promotion of group identity are crucial in promoting trust (Parks et al., 2013). The normative-cognitive perspective may be, to a certain degree, based on emotions and not necessarily on rational grounds (Massy, 2011). Another significance of trust founded on shared values is that it can promote voluntary cooperation and engagement between actors where instruments of control and command may no longer become effective, or fulfilment of commitments by a trustee is difficult to observe or evaluate precisely, and where it is impossible to fully control the behaviour of an actor (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003). However, perceived incongruence of values between actors causes suspicion and distrust rather than trust (Sitkin & Stickel, 1996).

In normative-cognitive perspective, trust is more effectively established through informal mechanisms such as commonality of values, norms and expectations (Zucker, 1986). In contrast to formal mechanisms, trust can be formed and sustained using informal rules where shared understandings of behavioural standards and

reciprocal confidence in the socialisation and adherence to such normative mechanisms is perceived to be high (Kramer, 1999; Sitkin & Roth, 1993; Zucker, 1986). This indicates that trust functions as a 'coordinating mechanism' which enables collective action under uncertain circumstances (Reed, 2001, p. 201). Informal mechanisms of trust production such as norms of reciprocity and socialisation, rest on deeper shared understandings of values and expectations between actors (Zucker, 1986). This underscores the importance of social rules in creating trust (Zucker, 1986), since trust can be based on cognition and expectations about social order and actors involved in specific interactions (De Boer, 2002; Li et al., 2012). Moreover, a positive assessment of trust and judgement about trustworthiness of actors can be predicated on a perceived shared membership of actors in a given social and organisational category, which can encourage an actor to develop a more optimistic cognitive orientation, expectations and favourable view on the characteristics of in-group actors, thus facilitating the formation of a positive 'presumptive trust' (Kramer, 1999, p. 577). Trust can more readily develop between actors who share similar social connection and background (Tyler, 2003). It is argued that the presence of '[r]elatively stable sets of norms, values, and rules underpin social relations and create a sense of belonging to a community' (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015, p. 32) and 'sense of identity' to actors (De Boer, 2002, p. 67). This implies that category-based assessments can inform shared understandings of mutual expectations and boundaries of acceptable and risk behaviour.

In contrast to an economic perspective that emphasise rational calculations, a sociological perspective considers that trust is founded on the assumption of 'collective orientation' in exchange for which a trustee can put its self-interests aside (Zucker, 1986). Trust, in such cases, is seen as a relational and social orientation (De Boer, 2002; Kramer, 1999), which seems to be linked to the sociological perspective of trust production (Zucker, 1986) and normative-cognitive perspective of trust building (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). The normative-cognitive perspective on trust seems to be underpinned by a sociological perspective focusing on moral beliefs and understanding that trusting other actors is the right thing to do in a given context (Zucker, 1986).

Some of the basic tenets of the normative-cognitive perspective seem to be broadly consistent with other conceptualisations of trust found in the literature. For instance, the notion of 'norm-based trust' places greater emphasis on moral aspects, where trust develops based on shared values and norms and enables collective actions (De Boer, 2002; Reed, 2001). Trust thus rests on the institutions of values and norms (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Such notions

place importance on the moral element of trust (De Boer, 2002). Another example can be the concept of ‘identification-based trust antecedent’ which indicate trust is built on the grounds that an actor identifies itself with the intentions, goals, and value of another through the course of repeated interactions (Li et al., 2012). Such notion seems to be consistent with what Zucker (1986) referred as ‘characteristic-based trust’, which rests on identification of cultural congruence and social similarity.

The literature indicates the importance of experience, knowledge and repeated interactions in building trust. The cultural and experiential perspectives on the foundations of trust postulate that trust develops and evolves mainly through socialisation and experience (Dinesen, 2012). The tacit knowledge accumulated over time and experience-based learning through repeated interactions enables actors to develop trust (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003; Boyle & Bonacich, 1970; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). This underscores the relevance of ‘knowledge-based trust’ (Adobor, 2006). Zucker (1986) refers to such trust building through incremental process as ‘process-based trust’ since it involves recurrent interactions which provide opportunities for an actor to accumulate knowledge about the trustworthiness of another actor. Trust involves a process of mutual learning (Hoecht, 2006). Additionally, drawing on a concept of ‘history-based trust’ as one of the main bases of trust, Kramer (1999) suggests that the trust between actors may strengthen or weaken as a result of interactional histories and patterns of behavioural interactions which provide actors with information useful in assessing current and future trustworthiness of whom they engage in interdependence. This suggests that trustworthiness tends to evolve socially, through repeated interactions, where the incentives for actors to be trustworthy towards others and cooperate become increasingly stronger, as random encounters gradually develop into ongoing relationships (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003; Hardin, 2002). This is partly because actors may recognise that, in the context of such repeated interactions, the potential costs of being a defector and uncooperative may be detrimental to them. The argument that trustworthiness tends to beget the possibilities of trust and cooperation between actors while defect and deceit begets distrust and erodes cooperation is central to such social evolutionary perspective of trust (Hardin, 2002, p. 138). In his study of government-university relationship using agency theory, Kivistö (2007) identified the length of an agency relationship as an important variable that can determine the level of mutual exposure of behaviour and trust between governments and universities, thereby informing governments’ choice of appropriate governance mechanisms. The presence of shared history, identity and tacit knowledge influences the development of trust between stakeholders within higher education systems (Stensaker &

Gornitzka, 2009). Such arguments seem to be consistent with the notions of 'history-based trust' (Kramer, 1999). Hence, the process of developing process can be long and slow (Bergan, 2012).

Applying the insights from normative-cognitive perspective in the context of higher education suggest that trust may emerge between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions based on the development of strong shared value, concern and commitment for assuring and enhancing quality and standards. A quality assurance agency may tend to build trust in those higher education institutions who have upheld strong institutional core values that stimulate quality and consistently demonstrated commitment to assuring and improving standards of their core operations through proper implementation of established procedures for quality monitoring in higher education. The reliability and consistency of quality standards both within higher education institutions and external stakeholders can enhance trust (Bloxham, 2012). The normative-cognitive perspective suggests that the convergence between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions on the values concerning quality, norms of responsible operation and procedures employed for quality monitoring play crucial role in the process of building and maintaining trust. In such cases, a quality assurance agency may less likely tend to focus on strictly controlling and regulating such higher education institutions and ensuring their compliance to quality standards. Instead, a quality assurance agency may tend to have a relatively less stringent approach and focus more on supporting the development of internal quality assurance procedures, practices and processes at those higher education institutions. Similarly, Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009) support the claim that less need for imposing strict regulation and control instruments emerges as higher education institutions become more trusted by internal and external stakeholders such as students, governments, labour market and society. Such can be the case where the relationship between higher education institutions and external stakeholders tends to be more stable (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). In such cases, the convergence on values, norms and procedures of quality, could imply that a higher education institution is likely to be open and honest to a quality assurance agency about its concerns and institutional capacity, which in turn can reduce the level of perceived potential risks for quality and standards of education. This suggests that the normative-cognitive perspective on trust-building places considerable importance on comparable values and norm patterns between the trustor and trustee thus seemingly assuming the presence of relatively more convenient foundations and enabling conditions for establishing trust in the trustee. The existence of trust may encourage quality assurance agencies to

delegate more responsibilities for quality assurance and decentralise authority to higher education institutions where the risks of opportunism and incompetence are perceived to be low. Trust can facilitate cooperation, stability and cohesion (De Boer, 2002). Such relationships between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions founded on trust, which is predicated on shared values and norms, may be more suited to safeguarding the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institution. It also gives higher education institutions more voice in the quality assurance process (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015).

Accordingly, the normative-cognitive perspective identifies the common systems of values, norms and procedures and institutional reputation as mechanisms that can be used to build trust (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Additionally, academic quality audits and student learning assessments have been considered further examples of the tools that belong to the category of the normative-cognitive mechanisms in higher education (Massy, 2011)⁵⁸. The expansion of global rankings and league tables play a role in the international reputation of higher education institutions (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). It is argued that reputation tends to encourage actors, who care for their reputation and image, to be committed to consistently behaving in ways that positively reinforce their reputation. The reputation of a higher education institution may influence its relationship with external stakeholder such as governments (Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015). Similarly, the reputation of a quality assurance agency and higher education institution may become a 'proxy for trust' (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015, p. 32). Such perspective on trust building enables a quality assurance agency to identify possible inconsistencies between the officially stated institutional values and the actual behaviour of higher education institutions. Trust built based on strong shared values and norms developed through repeated interactions, patterns of interactional history, and knowledge and experience may assist quality assurance agency in gradually distinguishing and filtering trustworthy higher education institutions from those that project inconsistent images, unreliable commitment and engage in deception. This underscores the argument that '[t]rust is achieved when actors, over time, demonstrate accountability through the results and outcomes produced' (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015, p. 32). Since the perception of quality informs trust (Bergan, 2012), higher education institutions which have built

⁵⁸ Massy (2011) also identifies performance contracts as a part of the normative-cognitive mechanisms, despite such legal and formalised tools that seek to create alignments in goals and outputs being mainly perceived as sharing the characteristics of the rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms. This, however, does not refute the notion that, in the normative-cognitive perspective, trust is built when accountability to outcomes is consistently demonstrated by actors (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

positive reputation and are perceived by external stakeholders such as quality assurance agencies as institutions that deliver quality education and research are more likely to be trusted than those higher education institutions that are infamous for compromising quality standards and having questionable commitment for quality (Bergan, 2012). This highlights that trust in higher education institutions is unlikely to develop if the institutions fail to demonstrate high quality standards in their operations to their external stakeholders. This is supported by evidence found in the literature that underscore the vital role that history, knowledge and experience and recurrent interactions have in trust building (Adobor, 2006; Kivistö, 2007; Kramer, 1999; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Zucker, 1986). In such cases, '[t]rust is built on reputation and building reputation can be a drawn out process that requires conscious efforts over a period of time' (Bergan, 2012, p. 53), but this also implies that trust built through such processes can be lost or broken if a higher education institution abandons or relaxes its efforts.

In contrast to the active role of public authorities and quality assurance agencies funded by and accountable to governments in the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective, Stensaker and Maassen (2015) identify a pattern that the normative-cognitive mechanism of trust building tends to involve other stakeholders, such as semi-autonomous or independent quality assurance agencies, professional networks, labour market and private actor. Higher education systems characterised by a normative-cognitive approach to trust building actively engage professional associations in quality assurance processes. The engagement of stakeholders other than public authorities is considered to be linked to internationalisation of higher education and the growing interest in the development of international quality standards and recognition and comparability of qualifications (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). The active participation of other stakeholders in quality assurance processes seem to show a transforming governance, where trust within the context of a previously bilateral setting linking governments and higher education institutions gradually giving way to multilateral relations and actors (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Trust continues to be a central issue in the deregulation, internationalisation, globalisation and other transformations taking place in higher education (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

In addition, Stensaker and Maassen (2015) suggest that disciplines and professions are other sources of values and norms of behaviour in higher education. Professional associations serve to safeguard professional values and enforce norms of practice and ethical standards that conform with minimum legal requirements among those who belong to respective professions and academic disciplines. The

literature indicates the positive role professional norms and codes of behaviour play in ensuring accountability of higher education institutions and academic communities to external stakeholders and enabling trust in higher education (e.g. Bovens, 2007; Erkkilä, 2007; Hansen et al., 2019; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Trow, 1996). However, as discussed in Chapter Four, there is a trend of growing distrust in traditional mechanisms of quality monitoring (Harvey, 1995; Power, 1997; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Trow, 1996), which advances a critical view on the professional integrity of academic communities.

Trust serves various functions. Kramer (1999, pp. 581-586) discusses that the benefits of trust include reduce transaction cost, engender spontaneous sociability, and enhance voluntary deference between actors involved in hierarchical relationships. In the absence of formal mechanisms of enforcing trust and reciprocity, trust can help reduce transaction cost by serving as a 'social decision heuristic', which informs behavioural rules of thumb in the process of decision making and encourages actors to interpret the intentions and actions of others with positive and generous assumptions (Kramer, 1999, p. 582). As such, trust provides a mechanism for coping with uncertainties by allowing a trustor, who considers placing its trust with no guarantee instruments and 'enforceable promises', to assume that a potential trustee will not opportunistically exploit and take advantage of the trust (Bachmann, 2001, p. 342). Trust, hence, can absorb complexities and diffuse uncertainties involved in an interaction between actors (Bachmann, 2001; Luhmann, 1979). The theoretical view that trust serves to confine uncertainties is rooted in the argument that it has a potential to create an atmosphere of interaction where 'trustors constantly try to find good reasons for believing that the risk they are prepared to accept is low' (Bachmann, 2001, p. 343). Moreover, trust can promote, among actors, a sense of obligation, attribute trustworthiness and voluntary deference to authorities, accept decisions and resolutions passed by authorities despite how unfavourable they may seem, and willingness to comply (Kramer, 1999). In the context of hierarchical relationship, as between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, trust can facilitate voluntary acceptance of decisions that authorities make and a feeling of obligation to comply with laws and rules (Tyler & Degoe, 1996). Such assessments of trustworthiness may also be influenced by what authorities do and project in addition to their perceived motives (De Boer, 2002). Moreover, trust can engender spontaneous sociability, which promotes positive social behaviour and augment collective well-being such as cooperation, reciprocity, altruism, information sharing, fair resource utilisation, and self-restraint (Kramer, 1999). The establishment of high degree of trust between higher education

institutions and external stakeholders, such as ministries and quality assurance agencies can facilitate a working interdependence supported with high degree of reliability, confidence and assurance (Spier, 2013). On the other hand, the extent to which higher education institutions perceive the trustworthiness of a quality assurance agency may impact their willingness to accept and properly implement the regulations, directives and guidelines issued by the agency.

However, the normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building are not free from criticism. First, trust as such is elusive, ephemeral and fragile (Bergan, 2012; Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999; McKnight et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986), which makes it difficult and time consuming to build but can be relatively easily and swiftly destroyable (Baier, 1986; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). Despite trust building entails a lengthy and arduous process, an established trust can be lost within a short period of time and suddenly broken or misplaced (Bachmann, 2001; Bergan, 2012; Harid, 2002; Vidovich & Currie, 2011). When trust is broken, remedies for restoring and building it can be costly (Bachmann, 2001; Kramer, 1999; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Zucker, 1986). Trust can also be fragile since behaviour that destroys trust tends to be more easily visible and carries more weight and becomes impactful than behaviour that builds trust (Slovic, 1993). Actors attach asymmetric weight and degree of judgement to trust and distrust, such that distrust is likely to be more easily noticeable and amplified than trust (Kramer, 1999). This could be because actors may selectively pay more attention to negative information than positive evidence. Hence, trust-eroding experiences may tend to draw more attention than those experiences that build trust (Hardin, 2002). This may perpetuate presumptive distrust in a given relationship (Kramer, 1999). Second, the potential risk involved in a given interaction, in some cases, can be intolerable for a trustor despite perceived commonality in motives with a trustee (Bachmann, 2001; Kramer, 1999). The nonlinear relationship between trust and uncertainty suggests that trust tends to decrease when the level of perceived risk and uncertainty is considerably high (Adobor, 2006; Bergan, 2012; Pope, 2004).

Third, such circumstances may increase the demand for more validating and situational information (McKnight et al., 1998) and additional structural assurances and guarantees that commitments will be honoured, for example, with the help of legal recourse and contractual agreements (Adobor, 2006; McKnight et al., 1998). Informal mechanisms of trust building alone may not be adequate to mitigate such high degrees of perceived risk. This indicates that trust, built on shared values and norms, is not the only mechanism for reducing risks and uncertainties, since power provides an alternative instrument to trust for absorbing uncertainties and reducing

risk (Bachmann, 2001; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). Optimistic assumptions and favourable thinking about the trustworthiness of a potential trustee may not be adequate when dealing with risk that exceeds an optimal level. Fourth, trust established based on overly optimistic assumptions can produce risks which may result in substantial losses (Bachmann, 2001). This is because misplacing trust can bring dangerous and harmful consequences to a trustor (Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Kramer, 1999). Fifth, despite high demands for trust, preferably established through normative-cognitive mechanisms, its supply is scarce, since developing and maintaining such trust requires the existence of strong shared values and norms of behaviour among actors (Spier, 13). Additionally, Stensaker and Maassen (2015, p. 37) identify that rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms dominate current global trends in international quality assurance in higher education, where public authorities exercise control over 'national-filtered trust', with limited space available for normative-cognitive mechanisms.

A comparative reflection of a rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive perspective on trust building discussed in this section suggests potential differences in the maturity of trust they produce. When considering sequential stages involved in the process of trust building, literature shows that identification-based trust is seen as the highest level of trust, as it is founded on a sense of mutual concern, commonality of goals and well-established mutual understanding, whereas calculative trust may signify lower stages of trust formation, and knowledge-based trust reflects a medium level development of trust (Kuo & Yu, 2009, p. 824; Li et al., 2012, p. 91). This may imply that trust built through rational and instrumental assessments and formal instruments of control and incentive may signify lower stages of trust formation, whereas trust established based on shared values, norms and patterns of procedures and reputation may be considered as a highest level of trust. Such theorisations may suggest that trust developed through normative-cognitive mechanisms seem to be relatively mature and deeper than trust safeguarded using rationalist-instrumentalist trust building (Massy, 2011). Trust is seen to develop sequentially through the course of repeated interactions between actors, thereby suggesting that the conditions, drivers and mechanisms that underpin its development gradually change as the depth and strength of an ongoing interaction increases (Li et al., 2012). However, information is crucial in both the perspectives of trust building, since rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms rely on making well-informed assessment of alternatives and potential costs and benefits whereas normative-cognitive mechanisms require knowledge of the appropriate moral and norms of behaviour (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). Moreover, both the perspectives

on trust building seem to be more relevant for gaining insight into how trust can be built than for exploring and analysing the nature of trust in a given context. However, the task of establishing and sustaining trust can be, in many cases, challenging (Kramer, 1999; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Zucker, 1986) regardless of mechanisms employed, since remedies to trust can be costly and ineffective (Kramer, 1999; Stensaker & Gronitzka, 2009).

Despite projecting a seemingly mutually opposing notions of trust, it can be more useful to employ conceptualisations of trust that acknowledge and carefully integrate elements of both the rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive perspectives in ways that suit the specific context in which trust is theoretically and empirically examined (Kramer, 1999). In complex hierarchical relationships, such as between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, trust tends to embody elements of both calculative or instrumental and relational and normative aspects (De Boer, 2002). This is because trust in any given relationship may involve a combination of values, reasons and interests (De Boer, 2002), where a trustor may rely on a 'hybrid' of both calculative and norm-based judgements (Massy, 2011; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011b). In most cases, a combination of internal and external inducements embedded and internalised by actors such as norms, social conventions and legal regulations that motivate and sanction specific type of behaviour can coerce a given party to become trustworthy (Bijlsma-Frankema & Van De Bunt, 2002; Das & Teng, 1998; Hardin, 2002). It is also argued that control and trust may function in different circumstances and respond to specific aspects of a relationship (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003), for instance, where reliance on control, monitoring and compliance can build trust during the early phases of a relationship where actors have limited familiarity with each other (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996), whereas trust can increase and risks minimised with less demands for control and monitoring when a relationship reaches a higher level of maturity (Costa, 2003). However, the rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive mechanisms, if badly designed, may also work against each other (Massy, 2011).

Hence, flexibility and diversity in trust-building mechanisms could be more fruitful since public authorities seem to more frequently rely on rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms for trust-building, whereas higher education institutions, agencies and private actors tend to utilise normative-cognitive mechanisms

(Stensaker & Maassen, 2015)⁵⁹. Balancing the application of instrumental mechanisms with developing solid normative trust becomes vital (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). In relative terms, Stensaker and Maassen (2015) argue that normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building have more potential than rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms for enabling a broader approach to quality assurance, which can enhance the engagement of multilateral actors. Such considerations are vital since fundamentally improving the quality of higher education requires the cultivation of a robust quality culture that is founded on mutual trust and active engagement of all stakeholders (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). However, as the size of a higher education system and stakeholders involved in interaction expands, it may create challenges with regard to ensuring transparency, obtaining adequate information on each stakeholder and subsequently developing trust (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

5.4 Selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust

The theoretical account provided by William Gamson, in his popular book titled 'Power and Discontent', analyses vertical power relationships between competing organisational constituents and subunits, with an objective of providing suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of organisational management. The theory belongs to the broad category of structural theories that address the issue of power in the context of organisations. Although the primary emphasis of this theory lies in the subject of power relations and organisational politics, its analysis also provides some insights for useful understanding trust relations between organisational constituencies in the context of a hierarchical setting, where competition for power and influence takes place upward and downward within organisational structures. The discussion of power relations has implications for level of trust between units at different hierarchical positions and type of influence tactics employed by these units and the rationales behind it.

As indicated in Bess and Dee (2008, p. 555), Gamson uses the term 'organisational authorities' to refer to those members of organisations who make binding decisions and exercise legitimate authority over their subordinates as,

⁵⁹ Some differences can be found in how public and private actors understand trust, such that public actors tend to see trust mainly from accountability concerns regarding resource utilisation and services provided to society in return, whereas private actors may view trust as a commodity or service, such as conducting rankings, which can be purchased and profited from (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009).

whereas those affected by the outcomes of these decisions and subjected to the authority are seen as 'potential partisans'. Such theoretical accounts could contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between external quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions despite the theory having its roots in the field of sociology. This would require expanding the theoretical discussion from one that is mainly confined to intra-organisational relations to a more inter-organisational context. Hence, it would become possible to associate the characterisation of organisational authorities with quality assurance agencies and partisans with higher education institutions. This is because the concern of the present study is exploring the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions with respect to quality and quality assurance and analysing what implications this may have for the nature of quality management models implemented in a given higher education system. However, Gamson's characterisations of different types of potential partisans may not directly apply to the nature of higher education institutions. These theoretical misfits, however, may not preclude the transferability of broad theoretical insights to quality assurance in higher education.

The Gamson's theory posits that the nature of relationship between organisational authorities and partisans is significantly influenced by the level of trust that exists between them (Gamson, 1968). It is argued that in circumstances where there are significant trust issues, organisational constituents would have more needs and interests to engage in activities aimed at influencing each other (Bess & Dee, 2008). The partisans' need to influence organisational authorities is largely inversely related to the level of trust they have in authorities. The existence of more trust would mean less interest to influence each other. Similarly, higher level of trust between actors can lead to less needs for formalised communication, delegation of tasks and supervision, which in turn is argued to facilitate effectiveness (Kovac & Jesenko, 2010).

Accordingly, Gamson's theory discusses three major categories of power and trust relations that capture different levels of trust attitudes between partisans and authorities, namely, high trust (confidence), moderate trust (neutral) and low trust (alienation) (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 556). It seems that the concept of trust is used to link the perspectives of power and influence tactics. The categories of high and low trust relations are seen to have complex challenges with respect to downward and upward influences and pose some adverse implications for overall organisational effectiveness. The theory claims that the condition of moderate trust and neutrality between organisational constituents provides an ideal and balanced situation for a

long-term improvement in organisational effectiveness⁶⁰. It is important to understand that all the three types of trust relations may exist within the same context of vertical relationship depending on specific issues at hand (Gamson, 1968). Interestingly, it is theorised that some degree of distrust between organisational members could be an essential aspect of a healthy organisational functioning. The application of such modes of relationships in the context of higher education could provide insights into exploring trust relations between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, and its implications for the nature of quality management models implemented in a given higher education system.

Moreover, Gamson's theory stipulates that organisational actors may employ different types of influence strategies, such as constraints, inducements and persuasion, depending on the specific level of trust that may exist between them (Bess & Dee, 2008, pp. 558-559). Constraints may involve the use of certain controlling mechanisms, additional disadvantages, and including restrictions, threats and penalties, to achieve desired outcomes. Inducements may comprise providing motivation, additional advantages, reward, or promises to influence others. It may also involve some degree of mutual concessions and compromises between organisational actors. The strategy of persuasion seeks to achieve desired outcomes mainly by way of convincing and changing the minds of others, without employing additional constraints and incentives. When linking different levels of trust with respective modes of influencing strategies, Gamson theorises that low trust relations correspond with employing strategies of constraints, moderate trust with strategies of inducement, and high trust with persuasion (Bess & Dee, 2008, pp. 557-561). This suggests that strong values for control emerge from negative assumptions about the motivations of actors and attitudes of suspicion whereas values for autonomy are likely to develop from positive assumptions concerning the inherent motivations of others (Bess & Dee, 2008; McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 2006). This relates to the two prominent assumptions identified by Douglas McGregor. Theory X assumes lack of inherent motivation in actors for fulfilling expectations and, hence, suggests the need for external control, coercion, direction, and including threats with punishment, whereas Theory Y assumes that actors have inherent commitment and

⁶⁰ However, conceptualisation of trust and distrust prevalent in the literature seem to emphasise descriptions of extreme scenarios where trustworthiness can or cannot be adequately established and, hence, seem to lack a richer analysis and theorisation on situations wherein neither trust nor distrust becomes visibly appropriate or actors may become relatively neutral with respect to assessing other's degree of trustworthiness (Hardin, 2002). It is important to duly recognise such scenarios where a given actor may assume a relatively neutral stance, where it may neither trust nor distrust another, in circumstances where adequate information about the other actor is not available on which to base such decisions.

motivation for carrying out responsibilities and expectations and are willingly cooperative, and hence relies on self-direction, self-control and promoting creativity as appropriate devices (McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 2006). The fundamentally opposing assumptions that Theory X and Y pose concerning actors' motivation and behaviour seem to relate with the essence of 'hard' and 'soft' management. However, Gamson recognises that organisational actors may employ a combination of strategies in a given situation. In fact, Gamson argues in favour of matching influence strategies depending on the context and level of trust existing between actors. Organisational authorities may also employ other influence tactics such as making binding decisions that partisans are required to implement, co-opting partisans into decision-making structures and participating partisans in decision-making processes (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 559). These tactics may broadly concern insulation (i.e. controlling and monitoring access to authorities), sanction (i.e. providing relevant rewards and punishments), and persuasion respectively (Bess & Dee, 2008, p. 562).

Bringing this theoretical discussion to the context of higher education may assist in better understanding how perceived level of trust between higher education institutions and external stakeholders, such as governments and quality assurance agencies, may influence the nature of accountability mechanisms, such as quality assurance instruments, to which higher education institutions are subjected. Gamson's theory may imply that circumstances of low trust between higher education institutions and external stakeholders may create an environment that fosters the implementation of quality management systems that are predominantly characterised by constraining, coercive, accountability-led and controlling orientations. On the other hand, it may be possible to infer from the theory that high trust between higher education institutions and external stakeholders may prompt a quality management model that is inherently enhancement-orientated, and tends to rely on persuasion, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, active communication and mutual understanding and commitment to responsibilities for quality and quality assurance. The third mode of category, suggests that when there is moderate trust between higher education institutions and external stakeholders, the quality assurance system in place may tend to incorporate tools that provide motivations and incentives to higher education institutions to work towards ensuring accountability to stakeholders and continuously enhancing quality of academic functions. Accordingly, the landscape of relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions may be analysed from this perspective of perceived level of trust and corresponding influencing strategies. Gamson's theory,

in this regard, may provide useful insights into why a specific higher education system may adopt quality management model that is fundamentally control and accountability-oriented, or enhancement-led, or a more balanced combination of the accountability and enhancement instruments. The theory may provide a systematic approach for analysing issues of power and trust between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies, and how they may influence each other. Its contribution lies in its conceptual leverage and well-organised theoretical propositions and synthesis.

The relevance of Gamson's theory to this study is highlighted by its value in theoretically linking the overall level of trust (explored using the four conceptual dimensions) with the rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive perspectives on trust building and the accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models. Unlike the two perspectives on trust building, Gamson's theory illustrates the implications that the low and high trust relations have for the nature of the approaches that actors in hierarchical settings may employ to influence each other.

Finally, this study takes a cautious approach in applying the Gamson's theory in the analysis of the empirical data. The present study identifies a significant overlap of theoretical notions between the Gamson's category of low trust relations and the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective on trust building and between the Gamson's category of high trust relations and the normative-cognitive perspective on trust building. Due to this consideration, the two are merged when applied in the empirical analysis in Chapter Nine. That is, the use of constraints as the key influencing strategy in the Gamson's category of low trust relations is merged with the instruments of control and regulation that are prescribed by the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective for building trust. Similarly, persuasion as the main influencing strategy in the Gamson's category of high trust relations is merged with the instruments of shared values and norms that are stipulated by the normative-cognitive perspective for building trust. As such, the visibility of the components of Gamson's theory in the empirical analysis of data may appear markedly absorbed by the two perspectives on trust building.

5.5 Quality management models

In this section, the study discusses the last component of the theoretical and analytical framework which links trust with quality management models. While the

four conceptual dimensions of trust assist in exploring the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions, the discussion of quality management models, in combination with the two perspectives on trust building and insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust support the analysis of the implications that the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions may have for quality management models implemented in a given higher education system.

A varying level of perceived trust can be observed in different quality management models. Although several types and forms of quality management models can be found in the research and practice of quality assurance. For such purposes analysing trust within diverse quality management models, it is possible to broadly categorise quality management models on the basis of the fundamental purpose they serve as those that are predominantly accountability-oriented and enhancement-led. The question of whether a quality assessment aims to monitor and control the quality of higher education institutions and utilise the outcomes of assessments for making decisions concerning planning and allocation of resources or assessments designed to stimulate and improve quality standards underlies how the role of a quality assessment is defined in a given higher education system (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Accordingly, it is posited that higher education systems where quality assurance agencies have weaker trust in higher education institutions may tend to employ a quality management model oriented towards ensuring accountability and compliance whereas a quality management model targeted at stimulating continuous quality enhancement may tend to be implemented where quality assurance agencies have weaker trust in higher education institutions. An understanding of the process through which a quality assurance practice is established, main purpose it serves, focus areas of evaluation and assessment, and the extent of stakeholder engagement in quality assurance processes may provide insight into differences in the nature of an accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models.

The section below presents a brief discussion of an accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models since the conceptual foundations and essence of these quality management models is already presented in Chapter Three directly and indirectly in greater detail. For instance, the accountability-oriented quality management and enhancement-led models are elaborated more or less directly in the discussion of the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement presented in section 3.5.2 and the tensions between accountability and improvement purposes in section 3.5.3. Additionally, the quality management

models are indirectly described in the discussion of the general links between external quality assurance conducted by quality assurance agencies serving accountability purposes and quality assurance carried out internally at higher education institutions addressing the needs for quality enhancement presented in section 3.5.1.

5.5.1 Accountability-oriented quality management model

The accountability-oriented quality management model⁶¹ mainly serves to safeguard the interests of stakeholders and ensure that higher education institutions carry out their fundamental missions in ways that conform to stated standards and expectations for societal responsibility (Vroeijerstijn, 1995; Vroeijerstijn & Acherman, 1990). Ensuring accountability and assessing compliance with externally defined goals, roles and agendas constitute the main rationales underlying quality assurance in higher education (Harvey, 1999). In such quality management model, higher education institutions are expected to demonstrate their compliance to the goals, interests and demands of external stakeholders, such as policy makers and fund providers (Lemaitre, 2002). Quality assurance is used for the purpose of inspecting, checking and confirming the extent to which higher education institutions fulfil stated minimum quality standards. Such a model appears to be consistent with the notion of a ‘retrospective’ quality assurance identified by Biggs (2001), which assesses what higher education institutions have done towards meeting the standards set by external bodies with a primary objective of ensuring accountability and conformance to standards and expectations held by stakeholders. This model of quality assurance is characterised by a considerable bureaucratic, managerial and top-down orientation rather than an academic perspective.

The accountability purpose of quality management involves ensuring and informing stakeholders and the public about the standard of educational services (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). This requires higher education institutions to be explicit in how they monitor the standards of academic functions and spend public resources. A quality management model focused on accountability and compliance requires higher education institutions to follow compulsory procedures related to quality assessment, for instance, implement regulations and directives governing higher education, align education, research and community service with government

⁶¹ In this study, terms such as accountability-oriented, compliance-oriented, compliance-driven, and control-oriented are used interchangeably.

policies and national development agenda, undergo periodic accreditation, establish internal mechanisms for quality monitoring, fulfil procedures required in organising, implementing and evaluating teaching and learning, and provide information about the status of institutional quality to the public, government and other stakeholders. Such quality evaluations cover several aspects of the teaching and learning, research and societal engagement functions of higher education institutions (Harvey, 2002). In such cases, external quality evaluation is seen as an externally imposed instrument of surveilling, governing, controlling, and regulating the work of academic staff (Barrow, 1999). Academics hence may distrust rigid regulatory systems (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013).

In a quality management system that is characterised by accountability orientation, there is more need to ensure the compliance of higher education institutions to legislations and regulations concerning quality standards and principles of lawful operation. In such quality management models, quality assurance agencies assume the mandate for coordinating and facilitating quality assurance and regulating standards at higher education institution (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Quality assurance agencies often tend to be occupied with evaluating and monitoring the extent to which higher education institutions fulfil stated minimum quality standards, for instance through undertaking programme and institutional level accreditations. External quality evaluations conducted in higher education by quality assurance agencies generally involve self-assessment, performance indicators or statistical indicators, peer review, and site visits (Harvey, 1998; Van Damme, 2000; Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990)⁶². More importantly, the literature indicates that accreditation constitutes a key component of an external quality assurance process whose purpose is oriented towards control (Stensaker, 2018, p. 55). As such, it has been argued that ‘accreditation may signal a strong emphasis on control’ (Danø & Stensaker, 2007, p.82). Rosa and Amaral (2012) further interpret the increasing emphasis on accreditation in terms of a move away from an approach to higher education institutions that is based on trust to one that is grounded more on suspicion. An accountability-oriented quality management model tends to be prevalent in higher education systems that heavily rely on accreditation as a major quality assurance instrument. Additionally, quality assurance agencies are required to validate and confirm self-evaluations undertaken by higher

⁶² As indicated in Chapter Three, particularly in section 3.4.1, there is growing convergence and comparability in methods, approaches and standards employed in external quality evaluations carried out by quality assurance agencies (Aelterman, 2006; Billing, 2004; Harvey, 2002; Van Damme, 2000; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993; Woodhouse, 1996).

education institutions through peer review and site visits. Accreditation and other procedures of external validation serve as useful mechanisms for regulating and monitoring the quality and performance of higher education institutions. Quality assurance agencies, in some countries, may also conduct unannounced and sudden site visits and inspections to ensure that regulations are followed, standards met, and unlawful operations deterred.

Moreover, external quality assurance agencies rather than higher education institutions and their academic communities tend to play a leading role in a quality management model with strong orientation towards ensuring accountability and compliance of higher education institutions to quality standards and interests of stakeholders. This seems to be in line with the argument that whether a government or higher education institutions initiate quality assurance processes and play a leading role in them contribute to the relative dominance of an accountability or improvement orientation within a quality management (Thune, 1997). Quality assurance may bear limited impact on quality improvement where the responsibility for quality assessment is dominated by external stakeholders such as governments, Ministries and quality assurance agencies than academics (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013).

Accordingly, governments and other external stakeholders such as quality assurance agencies in higher education systems with characteristics of control oriented quality assessment tend to be more interested in demonstrating to the public and other stakeholders that the performance of higher education institutions are effectively controlled and regulated than in improvements in quality, for instance, of study programmes at institutions (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Hence, safeguarding the quality of higher education and ensuring whether higher education institutions fulfil their responsibilities for guaranteeing quality is likely to be considered a priority. Despite some variations across higher education systems, accreditation and other instruments of external inspection enable quality assurance agencies to periodically monitor various aspects of higher education institutions such as strategic objectives and institutional management systems, organisation and implementation of education, relevance of research and community engagement, development of internal quality assurance mechanisms, adequacy of resources, facilities and infrastructure needed for carrying out core missions, quality of student support services, and adherence to legislations and regulations. A control-oriented quality assessment tends to be occupied with filtering higher education institutions with good quality from those that fall short of defined quality standards (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). The emphasis hence rests on proving whether

higher education institutions have put in place internal mechanisms for systematically monitoring quality and how well these mechanisms function. For transparency and accountability purposes, quality assurance agencies, as a common practice, publish the results of external quality evaluations they conduct on higher education institutions in the form of reports accessible to stakeholders and the general public (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002).

An accountability-oriented quality management approach may tend to rely on a framework of state control, state regulation and governmental steering of quality assessment (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Governments have interest in maintaining remote control and steering of the performance of higher education institutions, for instance through quality assurance agencies, since they have specific goals for higher education and cannot entirely rely on higher education institutions for their achievement due to, in part, lack of confidence in the ability and commitment of institutions (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). This seems to be consistent with the notion of ‘command or managerialist’ mode of evaluation in higher education conducted mainly based on objectives for education and criteria pre-set by governments (Kogan, 1990). Quality assurance constitutes an integral component of such broader accountability requirements applied in higher education (Salmi et al., 2017; Trow, 1996). The standards and criteria against which quality is assessed and methods employed in external quality evaluations are often defined by governments and quality assurance agencies rather than students and academic staff (Harvey, 2002). As a result, governments implement a range of instruments such as performance indicators⁶³, formal quality assurance requirements, combination of behaviour-based and outcome-based governance mechanisms (Kivistö, 2007; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015) and other tools to monitor the extent of progress towards established goals.

However, a strong orientation towards compliance to procedures and bureaucratic control in quality assurance can destroy mutual trust between higher education institutions and external stakeholders (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). Quality assurance systems with strong orientation towards control and verification tend to challenge the development of mutual trust between stakeholders involved in the process of quality assessment (Hoecht, 2006), such as between higher education

⁶³ Despite their capacity for providing ‘common language’ between governments and higher education institutions, performance indicators may often have ambiguous link with quality, provide limited insight into why and how the performance of higher education institutions is the way it is, can be confused for actual quality standards, serve different and at times conflicting goals, and linked to different purposes ranging from decision-making regarding planning to evaluation and resource allocation (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990, p. 93-97).

institutions and quality assurance agencies. The regulatory systems of quality assurance may create ‘an atmosphere of distrust’ between external monitoring bodies and higher education institutions and within internal constituents of higher education institutions, which may tend to lead to ‘conservatism’ and deter ‘enthusiasms for innovation’ (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013, p. 1268). Such issues account, in part, why quality assurance and external reviews may bear limited direct impact, and in some cases undesirable consequences, on the improvement of quality in teaching and learning.

However, literature suggests that the attitude of governments and quality assurance agencies plays a role in the success or failure of a quality assessment (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). An attitude of suspicion and lack of confidence in higher education institutions may raise the need for control and regulation (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009), whereas a perception of trust in the intention and abilities of higher education institutions may justify refraining from interference, respecting institutional autonomy and providing sufficient room and support for higher education institution to improve their internal quality monitoring mechanisms (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). In an accountability-oriented quality management system, the use of credible instruments of sanction and incentive are needed in interactions with stakeholders who cannot be fully trusted to behave in a desired way (Hoecht, 2006). The interest in control and accountability develops where stakeholders may not share similar commitment and concern (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). This suggests that a quality management model that emphasises on accountability, compliance and control seems to be consistent with a higher education system with a generally weaker trust relations between stakeholders and where quality assurance agencies tend to have less trust in the commitment and capacity of higher education institutions for safeguarding quality standards, openly communicate with quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders regarding the status of quality and internal quality assurance practices, and where a perceived higher risk is associated with whether higher education institutions will operate responsibly and with due consideration for quality concerns in the absence of external regulation. Driven by an increasing tendency of distrust towards academic staff, quality assurance systems may thus focus on policing and enforcing regulations on higher education institutions (Baldwin, 1997).

A quality management model that primarily aims at ensuring accountability to stakeholders often lacks deeper assessment of the quality of teaching and learning (Stensaker, 2018). In such contexts, quality assurance is seen to be primarily occupied with evaluating performance against stated standards, thus relatively narrow and

more bounded in nature (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). Assessing the development of quality culture in teaching and learning activities of a higher education institution, however, requires a systematic assessment of practices employed by academics to assure quality of teaching and learning at department and programme levels (Dill, 1998; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013). However, excessive emphasis on checking written policies and documents can promote a 'culture of compliance' (Dill, 1998, p. 72), where higher education institutions concentrate their effort at meeting requirements and passing evaluations. Fulfilling the requirements of quality evaluations can strain the workload of academics (Bergan, 2012; Newton, 2002). Quality assurance procedures consume valuable time away from teaching and research (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013). In predominantly compulsory and accountability-led external evaluation, higher education institutions more often than not tend to perceive external quality assurance agencies mainly as bureaucratic, patronising, intrusive, constraining, and political in nature (Aelterman, 2006; Baldwin, 1997; Colling & Harvey, 1995; Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Genis, 2002; Harvey, 1998; Harvey, 2002; Kells, 1999; Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

As discussed in Chapter Three, section 3.5.3, the coercive, regulatory and judgmental pressures of a quality management model with substantial emphasis on accountability, compliance and control can breed deception, impression management and playing the quality game, which can weaken institutional momentum for undertaking an open and honest critical self-reflection (Barrow, 1999; Baty, 1999; Frazer, 1997; Genis, 2002; Harvey, 1998; Harvey, 2002; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Hoecht, 2006; Leeuw, 2002; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Newton, 2000, 2002; Rippin et al., 1994; Trow, 1996; Van Damme, 2002; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The pressure to obtain approval for complying with stated standards and goals set by external stakeholders, a rigid accountability orientation in quality assurance systems, as indicated in the empirical evidence found in these studies, tends to encourage higher education institutions and academics to increasingly engage in superficial self-reflection and misleading exchange of information, which focuses on presenting oneself as positive as possible, with an overstating of strengths and withholding information pointing to one's weaknesses. In such cases, higher education institutions may incline to hiding perceived weaknesses rather than using quality assurance as a useful tool for stimulating continuous quality improvements and institutional transformation in areas in need of development. Higher education institutions thus focus on projecting a positive and favourable image to quality assurance agencies, Ministries and other stakeholders. Moreover, an emphasis on

compliance and control may lead to scepticism and resistance in higher education institutions and their academic communities (Newton, 2002).

Additionally, literature indicates that an accountability-oriented quality management which utilises external quality evaluations may encroach on academic profession (Baldwin, 1997; Barrow, 1999; Cheng, 2012; Kogan, 1990; Newton, 2002; Trow, 1993, 1994). Moreover, when quality assurance is employed as an instrument of control, it can compromise institutional autonomy and encroach on the integrity of academic profession (Hoecht, 2006). Distrust may also arise among academics towards instruments employed in quality control (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013). Such quality management model is often criticised for its overemphasis on accountability, compliance, top-down orientation, bureaucratic regulation, and the constraining atmosphere it breeds for academic functions and institutional autonomy. In addition to compromising autonomy, quality management systems that are designed to ensure control and accountability and compliance to standards may undermine intrinsic motivation (Hoecht, 2006).

Nevertheless, quality assurance processes, including in the case of an accountability oriented system, can contribute to strengthening collegial relations among, otherwise, fragmented and less engaging academic staff, since carry out quality assessments and meeting established criteria increases the needs for internal stakeholders to work in collaboration (Hoecht, 2006). Other positive impacts of such a quality management model include putting in place rigorous evaluation and regulation procedures, accords increasing attention on issues of quality and performance, and participates stakeholders in quality assessment (Baldwin, 1997).

In general, weak trust relations less likely create an environment conducive for facilitating active stakeholder engagement in quality assurance processes. The prevalence of mutual suspicion and lack of trust can create barrier to valuing and empowering stakeholders. This suggests the challenges that quality management systems characterised by strong accountability orientations face in developing robust stakeholder engagement. A compliance-driven quality assessment may lack a vigorous engagement of stakeholders such as students (e.g. Shah et al., 2014). Trust is thus needed to stimulate a robust participation and engagement of key stakeholders in quality assurance beyond quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions such as governments, Ministries, students and graduates, academic and administrative staff, parents, employers and industries, professional associations and society.

5.5.2 Enhancement-led quality management model

The enhancement-led quality management model⁶⁴ primarily aims to enhance overall academic quality (including quality of teaching and student learning), bring about continuous quality improvements and stimulate overall institutional transformations at higher education institutions (e.g. Colling & Harvey, 1995; Elassy, 2015; Lomas, 2004; Rippin et al., 1994; Williams, 2016). In such a model, the driving purpose of quality management no longer rests on continually satisfying the demands and interests of external stakeholders, but instead seeks to ‘fully account for the specialized nature of academic work and the natural laws of student development, and to adapt to social demands in an autonomous and constructive manner’ (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016, p. 16).

The underlying rationale for quality management hence becomes supporting the improvement of standards in input, process and outputs of higher education institutions (Harvey, 1999). Quality management with strong orientation towards enhancement-led model focuses on enhancement of student learning and improvement in the quality of an institution and its education programmes (Williams, 2016). It seeks to address enhancement of overall academic quality (including enhancing the quality of teaching, learning, and stimulating research environment), and enhancement of student experience and the quality of services provided to them (Rippin et al., 1994). Such type of quality management places emphasis on the quality of student learning and improvement of academic standards (Stensaker, 2018). This model of quality enhancement also focuses on overall institutional transformation (Lomas, 2004). This suggests that the notion of enhancement can be considered far higher and deeper in meaning and scale than mere quality improvement. Finland and Scotland are notable examples of countries which follow an enhancement-led quality management model.

Rather than conducting quality evaluations for the purpose of ensuring accountability and compliance to standards, a quality management model with robust enhancement-led character emphasises that the results of quality assessments must lead to tangible improvements. Stimulating lasting quality improvements and instilling quality culture requires utilising the information generated through quality assessments such as feedback for reinforcing strengths and good practices and recommendations for improving areas in need of development. Quality enhancement takes place when the results of quality assessment obtained through

⁶⁴ In this study, terms such as enhancement-led, enhancement-oriented, improvement-led, and improvement oriented are used interchangeably.

external evaluation are linked to continuous improvement of quality at higher education institutions (Colling & Harvey, 1995). Such a model appears to be consistent with the notion of a 'prospective' quality assurance identified by Biggs (2001), which deals with assuring the current and future quality of teaching and learning, and embodies a quality enhancement orientation that supports higher education institutions to achieve their missions and continuous improvement of its teaching, learning and performance of an institution as a whole. Such notions perceive quality assurance as a never-ending process of improving the quality of an institution, student learning and optimising scarce resources (Colling & Harvey, 1995).

External quality evaluations conducted by quality assurance agencies need to be accompanied with internal mechanisms, processes and initiatives at higher education institutions aimed at bringing about lasting improvements at higher education institutions (Colling & Harvey, 1995; Genis, 2002; Kahsay, 2012; Thune, 1997; Vroeijsstijn & Acherman, 1990). This is due to the fact that it is higher education institutions who assume the responsibility for implementing recommendations received from external evaluations. In contrast to an accountability-oriented quality management, an enhancement-led model has relatively better capacity for supporting the development of quality culture at higher education institutions (Lomas, 2004).

Quality audits and evaluations, rather than accreditation, tend to be the main external quality assurance instruments when the purpose of a quality assurance oriented towards improvement (Stensaker, 2018, p. 55). An improvement-oriented quality management approach tends to rely on the development of robust self-regulation mechanisms at higher education institutions (Vroeijsstijn & Acherman, 1990). Such a quality management model places greater emphasis on enhancing internal quality management practices, procedures and processes, supporting the development of systematic evaluation, actively engaging key stakeholders in evaluation processes, and utilising the evaluation system for continuously improving the quality and standards of operations (Vroeijsstijn & Acherman, 1990). The value of quality assessment in improving quality standards rests on its capacity to assist higher education institutions and their academic communities detect strengths and good practices and identify areas of concern and provide constructive feedback and suggestions useful for improvement and solving challenges. Quality assessment hence serves as a starting point and catalyst for undertaking quality improvement initiatives (Vroeijsstijn & Acherman, 1990). Moreover, quality and standards used for its assessment are defined by higher education institutions taking into account their specific contexts such as institutional goals, missions, history, environment and

location (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). In such quality management models, quality assurance agencies may focus on stimulating and supporting the development of robust internal quality management mechanisms at higher education institution (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Since such quality management procedures are based on a degree of perceived trust, there is often less need for quality assurance agencies to conduct an announced and surprise inspections on higher education institutions. The presence of trust can enable mutual commitment between stakeholders involved in quality assessment processes (Hoecht, 2006).

Quality management systems with relatively stronger trust foundations tend to focus on improvement-oriented quality assessments (Hoecht, 2006). The development of a relationship between higher education institutions and external stakeholders based on mutual trust enables a quality assurance system centred on quality improvement to take roots and support the capacity of institutions to meet the needs and expectations of stakeholders (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). Trust can serve a function of social control, encourage stakeholders to behave according to expectations and refrain from violating commitments (Hoecht, 2006). Accordingly, a quality assurance system founded on a well-functioning trust can be more effective since it has the capacity to reduce needs for and costs of supervision and monitoring and instead stimulate orientations towards quality improvement through enhancing intrinsic motivations (Hoecht, 2006). Trust can facilitate mutual learning, create mutual commitment and serve as a social control instrument (Hoecht, 2006). Moreover, trust is indispensable since ensuring continuous control and monitoring is challenging, if not impossible, and costly (Stensaker, 2018). The cultivation of mutual trust and accountability between higher education institutions and external stakeholders can support the development of an institutional quality culture oriented towards improving quality, promote shared responsibility for quality, and renew public trust in higher education (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). Trust is crucial for the effective functioning of higher education institutions at various levels and interactions of institutions with external stakeholders (Bergan, 2012).

Trust in the internal institutional intention and capacities of higher education institutions is crucial to the process of transferring the ownership of assuring and managing quality from quality assurance agencies to higher education institutions. This is based on the argument that higher education institutions should be the ones who take the primary responsibility for managing the quality of their own operations, instead of external quality assurance agencies and networks of these agencies operating at national, regional and international levels (Colling & Harvey, 1995; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Genis, 2002; INQAAHE, 2016; Jacobs, 2010; Kells,

1999; Kettunen, 2012; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Woodhouse, 2004). This also stems from the argument that the objective of external quality evaluation should be oriented towards quality improvement than ensuring accountability of higher education institutions to fund providers, government and other stakeholders (Yorke, 1996). However, a quality management with overly enhancement-led orientation may face the risk overlooking fundamental accountability requirements.

An enhancement-led quality management model respects autonomy of higher education institutions. Quality enhancement is believed to give more freedom and autonomy to institutions and enable developments in quality (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). The emphasis is on implementing quality management procedures in ways that motivate higher education institutions to strive for improving the quality of their academic functions rather than relying on approaches that overwhelm, burden and coerce institutions (Genis, 2002). Such quality management model is suited for supporting flexibility and diversity, rather than adopting standardised approaches, in the development of internal quality assurance practices, procedures and processes that would accommodate specific institutional needs (Billing, 2004; Genis, 2002). Quality assurance systems are expected stimulate quality improvements and encourage creativity (Bergan, 2012). Safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic and managerial self-governance can enhance the capacity of higher education institutions to pursue core missions with improved level of accountability to stakeholders. The development of trust in quality management processes can enable higher education institutions to be flexible, develop perceived strengths and preserve traditions (Bergan, 2012). As a result, in a quality management model oriented towards enhancing quality improvement, higher education institutions and their academic communities can be more open, honest and willing to engage in quality assessment processes and receptive to the recommendations for improvement (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). Quality enhancement is considered less constraining on academic staff, and promotes a culture of self-reflection (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013).

In an enhancement-led quality management, internal quality enhancement carried out through the active collaboration of students, faculties and administrative staff, rather than external quality assurance agencies, plays a leading role in quality assurance procedures, practices and processes. In such quality management systems, higher education institutions and their academic communities such as students and academic personnel are the main actors in quality assurance processes (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). Scholarly discussion increasingly emphasises the notion that higher

education institutions, rather than quality assurance agencies, must own and play a principal role in quality assurance processes (e.g. Colling & Harvey, 1995; Jacobs, 2010; Woodhouse, 2004). An enhancement-led quality management model requires the commitment and active engagement of everyone in a higher education institution if quality enhancement and a culture of continuous improvement are to become integral parts of an institutional character. Such an approach emphasises the roles and collective responsibilities that academic staff have for such processes to succeed (Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016). An enhancement-led quality management tends to facilitate a vigorous grassroots engagement in quality assessment processes (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013). However, research indicates that progress towards assuring the quality of stakeholder relations can be slow and challenging in higher education systems with a tradition of strong state governance, such as in Finland, despite adopting an enhancement-led quality management model (Lyytinen et al., 2017). In addition to balancing the interests of internal and external stakeholders, it can be challenging for higher education institutions to establish, develop and maintain stakeholder relations that are enduring, consistent and reciprocal in nature (Lyytinen et al., 2017).

In conceptually simplified terms, an accountability-oriented model of quality management is argued to be consistent with a higher education system where the level of trust between higher education institutions and external stakeholders such as quality assurance agencies is relatively weaker. On the contrary, the nature of an enhancement-led quality management model is consistent with a relatively mature higher education system with more stable and trusting structures of interaction between stakeholders, for instance between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies.

Despite the prevalent tensions between the accountability and improvement purposes of quality management and the increasing desire for quality enhancement orientation, both processes are necessary for higher education (Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Elassy, 2015; Genis, 2002; Kristensen, 2010; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The accountability and enhancement purposes and orientations in quality management, despite differences in methods and desired impact, are interrelated and useful approaches to manage quality in higher education (Colling & Harvey, 1995; Elassy, 2015; Elton, 2001, Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Harvey, 2007; Lomas, 2004; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Rippin et al., 1994; Williams, 2016; Yorke, 1996). Current trends suggest that quality assurance systems in many countries remain preoccupied with accountability orientations (Dill, 2000). In contrast, the level of attention given to and engagement with improvement orientation have lagged despite behind decades

of discourse, research and practice in quality assurance in higher education (Yorke, 2000). However, what is evident from the analysis of literature is the growing frustration with the limited capacity that accountability orientation has for directly impacting tangible improvements in quality and its undesirable side effects, and a considerable preference for stronger quality enhancement orientations in the research and practice of the quality agenda in higher education (e.g. Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013). It points to a clear preference for quality regimes that place more emphasis on building robust internal quality monitoring, self-regulation and quality enhancement orientation at institutional and system levels. Desired improvements in quality can be lasting when quality monitoring processes are driven internally, instead of being imposed externally for safeguarding accountability requirements. However, the desired shift in paradigm towards quality enhancement and transferring quality management responsibilities to higher education institutions themselves therefore requires the development and maintenance of mutual trust. Unlike such increasingly common trends, a reverse shift from an improvement-led to compliance driven quality assessment can be found in countries such as Australia (Shah et al., 2014).

A consideration of the relative advantages and limitations of each quality management model, it becomes reasonable to argue that it can be more beneficial for quality assurance systems in higher education to balance accountability and enhancement purposes (Danø & Stensaker, 2007; Singh, 2010; Vroeijerstijn, 1995). This is because it can be difficult to serve the accountability function without external quality evaluation by a quality assurance agency, and quality improvement without an established practice of self-evaluation at higher education institutions (Vroeijerstijn, 1995). Focusing only on either one is likely to make a quality evaluation incomplete. Further stressing the value of such arguments, Genis (2002, p. 70) argues that a 'balance between compliance with the norms and standards of the external quality assurance bodies, and initiatives of institutions to manage the quality of their programmes and delivery of education and training, would empower higher education to contribute to economic and social development'. An ideal quality management model would incorporate an optimal composition of the accountability and improvement functions (Danø & Stensaker, 2007). The demand for balancing accountability and enhancement in quality management may further suggest that although trust is a key ingredient in the quality assurance of higher education (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015), 'such trust needs to be tampered with caution, reserve and testing' (Spier, 2013, p. 22).

Although the extent to which quality assurance agencies trust higher education institutions and dynamics between accountability and improvement orientations in quality management can be shaped by the specific contexts and characteristics of higher education systems, it would be possible to conclude that quality assurance systems with weaker trust relationships may primarily focus on ensuring accountability and compliance of higher education institutions with predefined standards, whereas those with stronger trust relationships may tend to place more emphasis on supporting continuous quality improvement at higher education institutions. The tension and balance between such competing, but complementary, orientations shape the design and implementation of quality management in higher education.

Furthermore, the dynamics of the quality agenda, including the trends of accountability and enhancement purposes can be determined by the politics of higher education (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008). The political process involving these pressure groups, for instance, higher education institutions and organisations lobbying for higher education institutions, governments, and quasi-state actors such as independent or state-affiliated agencies, including quality assurance agencies and funding councils, shape the setting of the quality agenda (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008).

5.6 Interconnections between the components of the theoretical and analytical framework

The conceptual and theoretical models that were constructed into a theoretical and analytical framework guide the empirical examination of the two main research questions this study set out to answer. On one hand, the four conceptual dimensions of trust, namely concern, capacity, openness and risk, provide the analytical tool for answering the first research question, which seeks to explore the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions. On the other hand, a combination of the two perspectives on trust building, the selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust relations and the two models of quality management support the empirical analysis of the data related to the second research question, which seeks to analyse the implications that the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions may have for quality management models. The table below summarises the links between the research question and the theoretical and analytical framework.

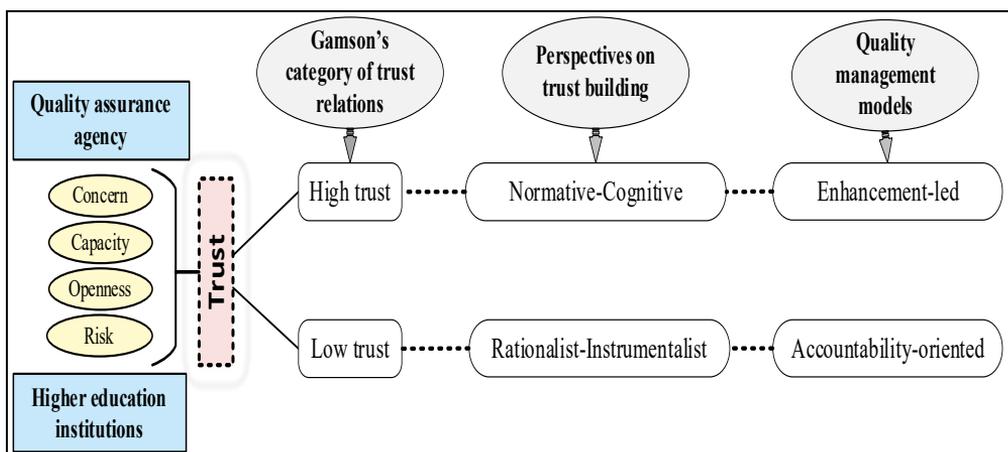
Table 2. Interconnections between the research questions and the theoretical and analytical framework

Research questions	Theoretical and analytical framework
1) To what extent does the quality assurance agency of Ethiopia trust higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptual dimensions of trust: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concern - Capacity - Openness - Risk
2) What implications does the extent to which the quality assurance agency of Ethiopia trusts higher education institutions have for the nature of the quality management model implemented in Ethiopian higher education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspectives on trust building: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rationalist-instrumentalist - Normative-cognitive • Selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust relations • Quality management models: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accountability-oriented - Enhancement-led

The theoretical and analytical framework postulates that the extent of trust a quality assurance agency has in higher education institutions, as explored based on the conceptual dimensions of concern, capacity, openness and risk, may have implications for the nature of the mechanisms employed for the trust building and quality management models put in place. The presence of strong trust relations tends to reduce the need for regulation and monitoring, whereas weak trust begets closer control and inspection. The interest in active monitoring and control mechanisms tends to be consistent with an environment that is predominantly characterised by distrust and low levels of trust (Kujala et al., 2016). It suggests that an emphasis on control is likely to be stemming from some degree of perceived distrust (Saunders et al., 2014). Trust is seen to contribute to the cultivation of optimistic expectations and cooperative values between actors and to enable actors to benefit from cooperation and ongoing relationships. On the other hand, distrust is perceived to reinforce pessimistic and uncooperative behaviour, erode positive intentions for social life, discourage actors from risk-taking tendencies and, therefore, hinder opportunities for engaging in gainful interactions with others (Hardin, 2002; Kujala et al., 2016). Similarly, high trust tends to beget more trust and cooperation, while low trust and suspicion fosters more suspicious intentions and uncooperative behaviour. It is posited that the actors may tend to become less vigilant and protective towards each other as the trust established between them develops and strengthens. These notions can illustrate the interrelation between the extent of the trust placed by a quality assurance agency in higher education institutions and how this may have implications for the quality management models. In relative terms,

weak trust of a quality assurance agency in higher education institutions is argued to be conceptually relatable to Gamson’s category of low trust relations, a rationalist-instrumentalist perspective on trust building and an accountability-oriented quality management model in higher education. In contrast, strong trust placed by a quality assurance agency in higher education institutions seems to have a significant conceptual affinity with Gamson’s category of high trust relations, the normative-cognitive perspective on trust building and an enhancement-led quality management model in higher education. Higher education systems with weaker trust relationships may primarily focus on ensuring the accountability and compliance of higher education institutions with the predefined standards, whereas those with stronger trust relationships may tend to place more emphasis on supporting continuous quality improvement at higher education institutions. A moderate level of trust provides an ideal environment for creating a balance between the control and trust instruments in higher education. In general, the perspectives on trust building and the selected insights from Gamson’s theory on power and trust serve to link the overall level of trust with the quality management models. The diagram below depicts the interconnections between the components of the theoretical and analytical framework that guide the empirical investigation of this study.

Figure 3. Interconnections between the analytical and theoretical models



A key point worth noting is that the empirical approach of the study does not intend to consider the theoretical perspectives on trust building, the insights from Gamson’s theory on power and trust or quality management models with a strict sense of mutual exclusiveness. The study concedes that, in practice, higher education

systems may embody characteristics of both the low and high trust category relations, a combination of rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building and incorporate elements of both accountability and enhancement orientations in quality management. This study attempts to analyse, within the settings of a higher education system, how a quality assurance agency's level of trust in higher education institutions may have implications for the relative dominance of an accountability-oriented or enhancement-led quality management model and the relative reliance on rationalist-instrumentalist or normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building.

The study recognises that the discussion of the theoretical and analytical framework presented in this chapter tends to be broader than the scope and depth of its application in the empirical investigation of the two research questions presented in Chapters Eight and Nine. This has been done in consideration of the wider potential significance that the framework could have for studies on trust in higher education in contrast to the relatively context-bound relevance of the specific empirical findings generated from the data analysis⁶⁵.

5.7 Challenges in empirically examining trust

Empirically examining the concept of trust can present challenges for researchers. The concept of trust is elusive and difficult to define in a universally accepted manner (Kramer, 1999; Pope, 2004; Zucker, 1986). An assessment of the previous studies on trust conducted by Mayer et al. (1995, pp. 709-711) suggests that most of the challenges in the empirical application of trust in organisational studies relate to the conceptual ambiguity surrounding trust. Researchers often need to navigate through numerous conceptualisations and overlapping categorisations of trust. There is lack of a clear distinction between trust and other associated aspects, such as the antecedents or factors that lead to trust and the outcomes of trust. The lack of conceptual clarity contributes to the confusing of trust with other similar notions, such as confidence, predictability and cooperation. Some of these conceptual issues extend to a confusion regarding the nature of the relationship between trust and risk, uncertainty and vulnerability (Adobor, 2006). Another aspect that makes the task of studying the subject of trust challenging is the perplexing nature of the conceptual

⁶⁵ A detailed reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical and analytical framework, based on its application in this study, can be found in Chapter Ten, section 10.1. This discussion also outlines the key theoretical implications of this study.

relationship that trust shares with distrust (Hardin, 2002). Regardless, it is often difficult to completely avoid at least partially addressing or inferring about distrust while conducting a conceptual, theoretical and empirical analysis of trust. Additionally, previous empirical studies tend to accord a disproportionate emphasis to either the trustor or the trustee, but rarely address both parties adequately (Mayer et al., 1995).

Aside from issues related to the lack of conceptual clarity, a direct and precise measurement of trust can be elusive, since the measurement of the dimensions of trust, internalisation of norms and compliance to the standards of behaviour and regulations can be challenging and costly (Zucker, 1986). Using a set of indicators may often provide an indirect measure and proxy of how 'likely [the development of] trust is and cumulatively indicate the rough amount of trust' with a limited capacity for analysing how crucial trust is in a given context (Zucker, 1986).

A consideration of the challenges briefly discussed above could help higher education researchers with taking a cautious approach while engaging the concept of trust in theoretical and empirical discussions. This underscores the importance of framing trust with a relative conceptual clarity as deemed appropriate and fitting according to the respective contexts of the studies. It is, however, imperative to recognise that there exists a relatively vast and well-developed (at times, complex and confusing) literature on the conceptual, theoretical and empirical discussion of trust in other disciplines, such as management, sociology, business studies, organisational studies and political science compared to the field of higher education. This further complicates the task of developing a conceptual framework of trust that is contextually relevant and disciplinarily unique with regard to higher education research. Informed of such obstacles, this study constructed its theoretical and analytical framework based on a review of the various conceptualisations, operationalisations and theoretical accounts on trust found elsewhere in the literature and within the field of higher education.

Another issue is the significance of considering both the trustor and trustee in the empirical studies that deal with trust. In this regard, the study is grounded in the argument that certain degree of mutual trust needs to exist between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions if quality assurance processes are to be effectively institutionalised, lead to continuous improvements in quality and yield the expected outcomes at national and institutional levels. The empirical investigation into the trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions attempts to adequately capture trust from the perspectives of both actors, albeit with a primary focus on the viewpoint of a quality assurance agency towards higher

education institutions. However, the study concedes that a comprehensive analysis of trust requires taking the perspectives of both actors into consideration.

Furthermore, the analysis of the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions and the implications it may have for the quality management models constitutes a crucial area of investigation. This is because the literature suggests that studies on trust should not be confined to examining its meaning and measuring its dimensions but should also attempt to assess the implications of trust for aspects such as the relevant organisational and institutional structures and functions (Pope, 2004). Thus, this study links trust to quality management models, albeit without employing a cause-effect type of analysis.

6 QUALITY ASSURANCE IN ETHIOPIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the nature and criticisms of quality assurance in the context of the Ethiopian higher education, and provide useful insight into how the relationship between higher education institutions and government and quality assurance agency is structured in the research context. It starts with an overview of the rapid massification of higher education in the country and the prevalent quality concerns. The chapter identifies several national and international influences, pressures and transformations that account for the emergence of formal quality assurance requirements, procedures and processes. The discussion extends to legislative and policy frameworks and the corresponding development of external and internal quality assurance practices in Ethiopia. It outlines the elements of the current quality assurance system. This is followed by a critical historical account of the nature of the relationship between higher education institutions and government, through the reigns of the imperial, military and incumbent administrations. Implications to the relationship between higher education institutions and the quality assurance agency are identified. Last, it concludes by highlighting the relevance of key points of the chapter to the main research questions of the study.

6.1 Rapid massification of higher education

The secular higher education system has evolved both in terms of its sheer size and diversification of institutions since the establishment of the first university in 1950. The rapid massification that has been taking place for the last twenty years particularly saw the establishment of many new institutions of higher learning and the reorganisation and upgrading of existing ones. It is possible to draw stark contrasts, for example, by comparing the conditions between 2000/01 and 2014/15

academic years; the number of public universities⁶⁶ grew from 6 to 37, non-government institutions climbed from 6 operating on a college status to over 100 institutions running in the capacity of a university, university college and college, the combined enrolment of public and private sectors across all undergraduate and postgraduate study programmes shot from just over 87,000 to about 770,000, the number of teaching staff similarly climbed from more than 3200 to over 27,000, and the number of those graduating from both public and private higher education institutions across all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes increased from about 18,000 to just over 155,000⁶⁷ (HERQA, 2018; Hussien, 2019c; Ministry of Education, 2001, 2016). The official statement released by the Ministry of Education maintains that the total number of public universities operating in the 2018/19 academic year stands at 50. Moreover, the records of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) for the 2019/20 academic year shows a total of 245 accredited private higher education institutions operating in the capacity of a university, university college and college (HERQA, 2020a; Tadele, 2020; Tesfa, 2020).

The aggressive expansion in higher education is mainly fuelled by the desire of the government to use higher education as an instrument to facilitate economic development and poverty reduction, build human capital desperately needed to realise development goals, and expand access to a rapidly expanding population of the relevant age group expected to enrol in higher education (Akalu, 2014; Saint, 2004). The pressure from international development partners such as the recommendations of the World Bank⁶⁸ on transforming various aspects of the Ethiopian higher education have been key factors which hastened the thrust towards massifying the higher education sector (World Bank, 2003).

Despite the proliferation of private higher education institutions, it is important to note that public higher education institutions are bigger in size, have better resources and facilities, are more prestigious and account for the majority of

⁶⁶ There were also a number of other public higher education institutions operating in the capacity of colleges providing discipline-specific trainings, bringing the total number of public higher education institutions to 17 (Ministry of Education, 2001).

⁶⁷ Although the official data on the 'Education Statistics Annual Abstract', published annually by the Ministry of Education, claims this figure, adding up the individual graduate numbers from the public and private sectors, and from both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes only suggests the total number of graduates to be just a little short of 120,000.

⁶⁸ The key recommendations of the World Bank sector study conducted in 2003 on transforming the Ethiopian higher education underscored the need to diversify revenue sources and develop more business-like management culture, introduce formula funding and block grant allocations, safeguard institutional autonomy, assure the quality of education, and cultivate competent and visionary leaders.

enrolment in the country. The private higher education sector, although consisting a large number of smaller institutions, still has not managed more than 16 per cent of total enrolment in higher education (HERQA, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2016). This could be seen primarily as the product of the structure of the education system in Ethiopia, where public higher education institutions host students who score the minimum required points in the 'Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Qualification Certificate' (EHEEQC) while the student population at private higher education institutions typically have been made up of those who failed to meet the cut-off point in this national entrance examination, those who have been academically dismissed from public higher education institutions for failing to make satisfactory academic progress, and working people who wish to improve their qualifications by attending lectures on evening and weekend schemes. Admission to public universities and subject placement of students is done centrally by the Ministry of Education, over which universities and students do not have a final say. This puts students in a different setting, unlike true customers who have the freedom to choose the services they wish to consume and influence the manner of the service provision. It is important to note that private higher education institutions do not receive financial support from the government whereas the public ones are almost fully sponsored by state funding.

The obvious growth in figures aside, it could be interesting to look at what has happened to institutional and disciplinary diversification through the course of this rapid massification. In this regard, it would be logical to argue that the expansion of higher education institutions and their intake capacity has enabled more institutional diversity to take place within the higher education sector, as more institutions of various nature and type are increasingly established, such as higher education institutions owned by the Ministry of Education, higher education institutions owned by other sectors and ministries, private higher education institutions, institutions founded by commercial associations, and branch campuses of international higher education institutions. The legal status of higher education institutions also has diversified, enabling these entities to be established at a rank of a university, university college, college and institute.

The mode of delivery in higher education institutions also has expanded from a traditionally full-time basis to weekend, evening, summer and distance learning platforms, although a source of concern for the quality of education. Online learning platforms are however underdeveloped largely due to a considerably limited capacity in the application of modern Information Communication Technology.

On the other hand, disciplinary diversification seems to have taken a reverse direction through the massification. In the beginning of the century, the Ethiopian higher education landscape consisted of a handful of institutions that provide training in selected disciplines, for instance, commerce, medicine, textile, civil service agriculture, engineering, water technology, and teacher education. What is witnessed today, despite the commendable expansion of access to previously marginalised areas and segments of the population, is the expansion of comprehensive higher education institutions, particularly in the public sector, that provide training in a variety of fields of studies, instead of transforming into reputable centres of excellences in selected areas disciplines. Even worse, there is a striking similarity among the vision and mission statements of most of the public higher education institutions, which places little consideration on relative institutional competences and capacity. The practice of prioritising of and confining core institutional efforts to certain mission, for instance, exceling in research or providing highly specialised education in certain fields has not yet permeated the cultural zeitgeist of the Ethiopian higher education. Moreover, the issue of quality has remained to be a key concern throughout the short history of the secular higher education in Ethiopia.

6.2 Prevalent quality concerns and thrust for quality assurance

The threat that the aggressive expansion poses on the quality of education is widely acknowledged (Akalu, 2014; Areaya, 2010; Saint, 2004; World Bank, 2003). A combination of national and international influences and transformations provided the thrust for the introduction of formal quality assurance mechanisms in the Ethiopian higher education. The growing pressure to ensure the relevance and quality of higher education resulted in the establishment of a national structure—the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA)—with a mandate to supervise and monitor the relevance and quality of higher education at national level (Aga, 2006), and the creation of institutional quality enhancement practices.

6.2.1 National pressures and transformations towards quality assurance

A multitude of national influences, pressures and transformations compounded the quality problem in the Ethiopian higher education and demanded the establishment and implementation of formal quality assurance policies, structures, processes and

procedures. These national pressures and transformations include sever limitations in the quality of educational input, process and output, inadequacy of existing mechanisms of monitoring quality and academic standards, changing national enrolment policy, and growing attention given to the topic of quality in higher education research and practice and public discussion.

Breakneck expansion and limitations in the quality of educational input, process and output

The rapid massification of higher education brought massive challenges to quality standards at higher education institutions (e.g. Akalu, 2014; Eshete, 2008; Teshome & Kebede, 2009; World Bank, 2005). The expansion strained resources and compromised the quality of student learning. Studies indicated shortage of quality in higher education input, process and output which underscore the increasing concerns over the quality of higher education and provide the thrust for a robust quality assurance mechanism. The quality of educational inputs and processes is significantly related to the output of student learning (Kahsay, 2012).

The quality of students, admission and placement procedures, academic staff (size, qualification, job satisfaction, staff recruitment, appraisal and development procedures), and resources (finance, campus facilities and student support services) are largely inadequate (Geda, 2014; Yirdaw, 2016). Public universities are found to be suffering from a chronic deficiency, inaccessibility and adequacy of basic infrastructural facilities, and teaching-aid materials (Kahsay, 2012). This shows the imbalance between access cost and quality in Ethiopian higher education.

Interestingly, per student financial expenditure at national and university levels failed to respond to the rapidly increasing enrolment size in higher education (Kahsay, 2012). A student cost-sharing scheme has been in place since 2005 in order relieve the government from shouldering the full burden of financing tuition fee, food and accommodation (Yizengaw, 2006) and to transform students into 'customers' and introduce a 'quasi-market' character into the higher education arena (Woldegiorgis, 2008; Yizengaw, 2007). This graduate tax scheme was expected to supplement government efforts to expand access to higher education and address equitability issues (Yizengaw, 2007). However, limitations in the cost recovery system and high default rate as a result of ineffective graduate tracing mechanisms (Woldegiorgis, 2008) and declining graduate employability posed obstacle for the realisation of the cost sharing policy.

The problems in educational quality is further explained by the practice of central screening and placement of students into public universities which impinges upon the competitive advantage of universities and the disciplinary choice and academic performance of students (Kahsay, 2012).

A critical assessment of quality of educational processes indicate that the satisfaction on the teaching-learning processes, teaching methods, assessment and grading practices, staff recruitment and development procedures, staff and student engagement in improving educational quality, quality and habit of using university facilities exacerbated the poor status of quality in universities (Kahsay, 2012). The lack of academic staff with required qualification, experience and commitment makes the challenge of upholding quality standards daunting. Internally, the status of teaching and learning resources, commitment of university management, and engagement of students in their learning constitute factors that exacerbate the quality problem in the Ethiopian higher education (Geda, 2014).

On the output side, the insufficient learning competences and academic deficiency of students resulting in student non-completion constrained the quality of educational output (Kahsay, 2012). Cognisant of the alarming concerns and the need to mitigate the risk of declining quality in the face of breakneck expansion, both in the public and private sectors, the Higher Education Proclamation (351/2003) made provisions for establishing national and institutional mechanisms to regulate the relevance and quality of higher education (Eshete, 2008; FDRE, 2003).

Inadequacy of existing quality assurance practices

Another factor that accentuates the quality problem in the Ethiopian higher education is the inadequacy of existing mechanisms put in place for monitoring and upholding academic standards. Current quality assurance systems are at early stages of development (Abebe, 2014; Geda, 2014). University specific and environmental contextual factors are inadequate to stimulate an effective system and practice of quality assurance at universities (Kahsay, 2012). Such inadequacies in quality assurance policies, structures, mechanisms and processes pose serious obstacles to endeavours aimed at arresting the declining quality of higher education (Geda, 2014).

A closer look into higher education institutions indicates that current efforts are challenged by considerable constraints in capacity of quality assurance officers (training, knowledge, and experience), institutional commitment towards quality assurance activities, participation of students and academic staff, curriculum review processes, instilling quality culture, self-evaluation for the purpose of external review,

safeguarding institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Geda, 2014). Weak governance structures at private higher education institutions slow response to quality problems (Yirdaw, 2010). There are also limitations in balancing external assurance and internal processes of quality enhancement, developing effective internal quality assurance systems, securing active participation of stakeholders in quality management efforts, and capacity of the national quality agency (Girma, 2014).

The development of quality assurance has been largely driven by top-down requirements than genuine bottom-up initiatives at higher education institutions. There is little evidence on self-initiated and internally-driven quality enhancement activities in Ethiopian higher education institutions (Geda, 2014). This is further explained by the coercive external pressures from the government, Ministry of Education, and national quality agency which form the key source of initiations towards establishing quality assurance at higher education institutions (Abebe, 2014; Geda, 2014). For example, Kahsay (2012, p. 189) and Tadesse (2014, p. 144) claim that formal quality assurance practices were introduced to higher education as part of the government's public sector reform implementation with an underlying model of Business Process Re-engineering (BPR). The centralised top-down control model in use by the government abetted its interest in holding higher education intuitions (Areaya, 2010). The dangers of rigid external specifications and the practice of dictating reforms agendas on several aspects of higher education including, for instance, structure of institutional management and organisation of curriculum encroaches upon the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions (Asgedom, 2009). This underlines how challenging it is for higher education institutions to succeed in cultivating a robust institutional quality enhancement capacity amidst such dreadful circumstances. It suggests the need to develop quality assurance systems through active participation of stakeholders.

On the other hand, the existence of supportive policy framework, regulative role of the national quality agency, and gradually expanding quality monitoring practices provide opportunities for the development of quality assurance (Girma, 2014).

Need for regulating a booming private higher education

One of the key drivers for introducing quality assurance in Ethiopia was the understanding, on the part of the government, of the need to regulate the standards of the rapidly proliferating private higher education institutions and safeguard the public from potential fraudulent providers and degree-mills. Quality assurance such

as accreditation procedures were introduced to the Ethiopian higher education ‘as a response to the birth of private providers’ (Tamrat, 2012, p. 45). Despite quality being among the issues at the centre of reforms in the education sector, the move to put in place formal quality assurance mechanisms could be seen as a response to the proliferation of private higher education institutions (Teshome & Kebede, 2009).

The concern over the profit-maximisation orientation of private higher education institutions has been increasingly seen as the main source of concern for compromising quality standards (Tesfaye, 2019). Private institutions are alleged to prioritise financial success at the expense of quality standards and adhering to lawful operations. Recently, a discussion held between the quality assurance agency and stakeholders on issues of quality in higher education stressed that while public higher education institutions need to pay closer attention to fulfilling the essential infrastructure and inputs for a quality teaching and learning, private institutions must avoid tendencies of profit-maximisation and should work more on ensuring that graduates meet the standards of the labour market (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018). The empirical analysis of data presented in Chapters Eight and Nine further discuss the profit motive of private higher education institutions and the underlying threats it poses to quality and quality assurance as perceived by respondents at HERQA, case higher education institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers.

Looking at international experiences, governments may tend to employ a more restrictive and controlling approach particularly towards non-public, for-profit, private and foreign providers of higher education institutions due to concerns over the quality and relevance of their training programmes. The rise of ‘pseudouniversities’ with compromised regard to traditional academic values has been another source of concern (Altbach, 2001). Non-public and non-domestic institutions may generally tend to be viewed with suspicion for their possible nonconformity to national standards and essentially as enterprises driven by money-making motives. As a result of such established perceptions, ‘[p]rivate and foreign provision was seen in many cases as corrupted and not respecting national standards, an idea nurtured by some scandals and a wide-spread panic over the misbehaviour of diploma mills and other rogue providers’ (Van Damme, 2002, pp. 18-19). This fosters the need to impose harsh and protectionist mechanisms of regulating the powers and responsibilities of such higher education institutions. The need to safeguard national quality standards, lawful frameworks of operation and relevance of training to national policy objectives has led governments around the world to introduce strict legislations that stipulate requirements for registration and licensing

of private higher education institutions and provisions on the recognition of degrees and qualifications they grant (Van Damme, 2002). In some cases, private and foreign higher education providers may be harshly restricted or tolerated on grounds of binding respective national and international policy provision on free market. Despite the trend of perceiving private higher education institutions as sources of concern seem to be widespread in different parts of the world, such tendencies may be more pronounced in developing countries. The perceived need to regulate quality and ensure standards, particularly in the private sector in many cases provided the crucial motivation for establishing quality assurance procedures in African higher education (MacGregor, 2009; Shabani, 2013).

Changing enrolment policy

The nationally adopted enrolment composition of 70:30 for higher education between natural sciences and technology fields and social sciences and humanities exacerbates the pressure on the quality of training that Ethiopian higher education institutions are able to provide given the considerable constraints they have in fulfilling the necessary educational facilities. Such national policy targets for enrolment, unless carefully designed, may lack congruence with the demands of the labour market (Alabi et al., 2013). Accordingly, the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) study found that this enrolment policy has produced relatively more graduates than the current labour market can absorb (Ministry of Education & Education Strategy Centre, 2018, p. 56). Such misalignment may aggravate the unemployment problem among university graduates. The roadmap study also further confirmed that the quality of science and technology teaching has been compromised due to the severe shortage of qualified academic staff and lack of sufficient and well-established laboratories and workshops (p. 56). Such trends have complicated existing quality problems and underscored the need for initiatives directed at improving quality and standards in the Ethiopian higher education.

Quality at the public limelight

Another interesting development is that the issue of quality and quality assurance has gradually penetrated the realm of higher education research in Ethiopia. Quality is increasingly becoming a topic of research and agenda of discussion. It is

encouraging to see that the number of studies that revolve around the topic of quality in the context of Ethiopian higher education is on the rise. As discussed in detail in Chapter One, there are studies that looked into for instance the adoption of formal quality assurance (Kahsay, 2012), implementation of policy frameworks related to on quality assurance (Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Saketa, 2014), role and implications of institutional governance in quality assurance (Bassa, 2014; Yirdaw, 2014), perceptions on service quality at higher education institutions (Lodesso, 2012), accreditation procedures applied in private higher education institutions (Bekele, 2009), procedures of quality audit (Weldemariam, 2008), and institutionalisation of quality assurance in universities (Abebe, 2014). Over the last fifteen years, the issue of quality of education has penetrated into the sphere of politics and public discussion. Nowadays, it has become commonplace to hear government leaders, members of parliament, opposition parties, diaspora communities and other segments of society to express their concern over falling standards of education and growing graduate unemployment. Such a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders, as a matter of political rhetoric, continue to pontificate on the quality of public universities and private higher education institutions. The focus on the concerns over the perceived deteriorating quality of education seem to be gaining momentum, rather than fading out, as could be seen when delving more into the political debates and agendas of the ruling and opposition parties and general public discussion. The debate over education policy and quality problems intensifies as political debates build up, particularly during election campaigns (Ashcroft, 2003). Such developments contribute to improved understanding of system and institutional level quality problems and mechanisms that need to be put in place to address these challenges.

6.2.2 International influence towards quality assurance

International influence and global transformations in higher education accounts for the introduction of formal mechanisms of quality assurance in the Ethiopian higher. As discussed in Chapter Three, a number of countries in Africa including Ethiopia have made progress towards establishing national structures for monitoring the quality of higher education.

The pressure of the quality agenda spread from organisations and transformations in the developed world (such as World Bank, OECD, Bologna Process) and catalysed by other continental developments within Africa such as the

harmonisation of higher education strategy and setting up of the African Higher Education and Research Space (Shabani et al., 2014). Such international organisations support global efforts aimed at improving quality in higher education (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Singh, 2010). As a result, the rapid expansion of quality assurance has transcended the boundaries of higher education institutions and national structures to take on a wider trans-national scope.

The literature also suggests that quality assurance practices spread mainly from developed countries to developing world (Singh, 2010). It has therefore been a common practice in developing countries to adopt quality assurance models and standards in use at developed countries (Billing, 2004; Lemaitre, 2002; Ryan, 1993; Van Damme, 2000). Such trends can be indicative of ‘hopping on a quality assurance bandwagon, not based on its merits, but based on what others do’ (Tadesse, 2014, p. 150).

Critics argue that such powerful international organisations and development aid donors predominantly utilise their funding and financial resources and rely on symbolic power of their knowledge based policy regulatory framework, mostly invisible and disguised whereas prescriptive at times, to influence education policies and practices in developing countries such as Ethiopia (e.g. Molla, 2013; Teferra, 2004; Woldegiyorgis, 2014).

Such knowledge-based symbolic power of the World Bank has shaped a number of higher education policy reform agendas in Ethiopia such as bringing a neo-liberal elements such as quasi-market character into the higher education, granting more autonomy for higher education institutions, introducing cost sharing schemes in the form of a modified Australian graduate tax model (Yizengaw, 2007), opening up space for private higher education to proliferate, emphasising accountability and introducing quality assurance practices (Eshete, 2008; Molla, 2013). The World Bank’s 2003 influential publication titled ‘Higher Education Development for Ethiopia: Pursuing the Vision’ clearly stipulated these policy agendas. This document clearly called on the Ministry of Education to ensure effective implementation of the proposed, if not prescribed, reforms (World Bank, 2003), thus making such agenda setting roles of the Bank ‘merely a one-way persuasion’ and ‘policy prescriptions’ that lack consensus and reciprocal dialogue (Molla, 2013, p. 184)⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ However, an interview with a respondent serving in a high-ranking position at the Ministry of Education during HERQA’s establishment ardently dismissed such claims espousing pressure from the World Bank and other international organisations as underlying factor, and rather underlined that the agency was founded based on the initiation of the Ministry. Perhaps contradictory to such claims, a review of documents found that, for example in 2006, HERQA had submitted its annual report and planned activities for forthcoming fiscal year to the World Bank.

The World Bank policy advice, experts from the United Kingdom and funding from the Netherlands are some of the external forces that contributed to the introduction of formal quality assurance in Ethiopia (Tadesse, 2014). The aforementioned reforms began to be implemented soon after World Bank's prescriptive report, mainly with the assistance and leadership of international experts. The two intermediary agencies, Higher Education Strategy Centre (HESC)⁷⁰ and Quality and Relevance Assurance Agency (QRAA)⁷¹, established to support the development of higher education were headed by such experts during their starting period (Eshete, 2008). It may be difficult for developing countries like Ethiopia to be immune to such influences in this age where increasing globalisation and internationalisation of higher education activities increasingly affect various aspects of national higher education policies. The increasing demand for mobility and recognition of qualifications, pursuit of national and institutional reputation, competition in transnational tertiary education market and cross-border economic activities, and other factors associated with globalisation accentuated the need to assure and enhance the quality of higher education (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002).

6.3 Legislative and policy frameworks on quality assurance

The quality assurance system is supported with relevant national and institutional level policy frameworks. At national level, the 'Education and Training Policy' broadly outlines the objectives of education and the importance of ensuring quality through developing the knowledge, cognitive abilities, problem-solving skills and behavioural change of students and contributing towards an all-rounded development of society (FDRE, 1994). The policy also sets overall strategy for education structure, curriculum, educational management, and nexus between education, research and development. The policy framework, the higher education proclamation (351/2003) and its revised proclamation (650/2009) describe the objectives of higher education, make provisions on institutional status and autonomy, regulations on staff and students of higher education institutions, management and financing of public higher education institutions, accountability and accreditation (pre-accreditation, accreditation and accreditation renewal) requirements of private higher education institutions, specify the powers, mandates and management of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency, i.e. the

⁷⁰ Later renamed to Education Strategy Centre (ESC)

⁷¹ Later renamed to Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA)

quality assurance agency. Moreover, the proclamation (351/2003) formally established the quality assurance agency and introduced external quality assurance into the Ethiopian higher education arena. In contrast, the contribution of the proclamation (650/2009) to quality assurance lays particularly in the provisions that formally require higher education institutions to assume responsibility for institutional quality enhancement (FDRE, 2009). This made it compulsory for higher education institutions to create internal structures responsible for conducting quality assurance, develop quality assurance policy and guidelines, and allocate resources for institutional quality enhancement activities. The proclamation also has expanded provisions on the governance and internal structure of public universities. In addition to the proclamations, strategic and technical guidelines such as the series of Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP) has been implemented to support the development of higher education and quality assurance in Ethiopia.

At institutional level, quality assurance practices, procedures and processes are supported with institutional academic regulations, senate legislations, academic quality assurance policies and other frameworks. One of the impacts of the higher education proclamation (650/2009) can be seen in the progress higher education institutions have made towards developing institutional level academic quality assurance policies that guide overall internal quality assurance processes (Abebe, 2014; Girma, 2014). These policies serve to define the objectives and focus areas of institutional quality assurance activities, organise quality assurance mechanisms and tools, define role and responsibilities for quality assurance, specify structure and line of accountability and other important issues pertaining to institutional quality enhancement work. However, more commitment is needed in translating these policies into concrete activities that can support the development of quality at higher education institutions.

Recently, the higher education proclamation (650/2009) is in the process of revision. The draft is currently under discussion in the House of Peoples' Representatives, i.e. the parliament, and its standing committee for human resources development and technology is tasked to study and comment on the draft proclamation in detail. The media reports suggest that one of the key changes being deliberated is granting the quality assurance agency full autonomy discontinuing its accountability directly to the Ministry of Education, in order to enhance the capacity of the agency and allow it to conduct quality evaluations and accreditations and enforce sanctions on public higher education institutions in the same way it has been doing in private institutions ("House of Peoples' Representatives Deliberated on a Draft Proclamation," 2019). The proposed change is consistent with the policy

recommendations put forth in the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) study and the review of roles and functions of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA). The ongoing discussion also considers removing the paradox that is associated with making the board of public universities directly accountable to the Ministry of Education or the relevant regional authorities. This proposal seeks to change Article 44, sub-article 2, of higher education proclamation (650/2009) which states that ‘the Board shall be accountable to the Ministry or, in case of an institution under a state, to the appropriate organ of the state government’ (FDRE, 2009). The parliament also commented that the new higher education proclamation should be approved after the education roadmap study is finalised and approved.

6.4 Emergence of external and internal quality assurance in Ethiopia

The introduction of formal quality assurance is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Ethiopian higher education system (Ashcroft, 2004; Girma, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Lodesso, 2012). Previous practices indicate some earlier less structured attempts of monitoring academic standards and teaching-learning processes since the early 1950s. Quality assessment at Ethiopian higher education institutions have for years focused on monitoring qualification of academic staff, carrying out teacher evaluation (often by students, peers and heads of departments) and conducting curriculum reviews (Lodesso, 2012). However, the external and institutional quality assurance system put in place with the provisions of the Higher Education Proclamations (351/2003) and (650/2009) can be considered relatively more systematic, as it was accompanied by supportive policy and strategy frameworks, clear objectives, specification of responsibilities, establishment of formal structures and organisational units tasked with responsibilities for implementation, political and leadership support that provide guidance and enable mobilisation of necessary human, financial and material resources, a set of systematic procedures, practices and processes, and a structured time frame for activities.

The national quality agency was established in 2003 with a mandate to oversee and supervise relevance and quality of study programmes and higher education institutions. The agency however became more functional in the years after 2005 (Geda, 2014, p. 298). The first institutional quality audits were conducted in 2004/5 on selected public universities and private university colleges (Lodesso, 2012, p. 66).

The assessment involved self-evaluation by these higher education institutions, a panel of peer reviewers selected from various higher education institutions and site visits with the guidance of the national quality agency. Such initial exercises soon expanded in 2008 when all public universities operating at the time carried out self-evaluation to support quality improvements in overall aspects of institutional core functions (Geda, 2014). The national quality agency, given its considerable capacity limitations, has made efforts to spread quality assessment practices, provide training to academic and administrative staff on quality assurance and support and advise higher education institutions on quality matters (Lodesso, 2012).

The establishment of the national quality agency was later followed by the creation of internal structures and processes within public universities for assessing quality of teaching and learning. The Academic Development and Resource Centres (ADRCs) established as a result of the growing pressure to ensure the relevance and quality of higher education at institutional level became the earlier forms and structures of internal quality assurance at Ethiopian public universities. The main responsibilities of ADRCs was to promote quality culture, support staff development, and facilitate professional resources and services at universities (Aga, 2006; Lodesso, 2012). These units assisted universities in developing instruments for assessing and monitoring the quality of teaching and learning and providing training to staff on quality assurance. ADRCs developed guidelines and procedures for assessing quality were developed (Lodesso, 2012). Their engagement extended to formulating intervention measures based on areas in need of development identified through assessments. ADRCs became the key resources units for universities for conducting institutional self-evaluation and ensuring that procedures are in place to support departments systematically check the quality of teaching and learning (Aga, 2006). As part of their responsibility, ADRCs liaised with the national quality agency on matters pertaining to the quality assessment of study programmes and academic functions of universities (Aga, 2006, p. 38). However, these early sporadic attempts of institutional procedures and practices lacked a holistic approach (Eshete, 2008). The revised Higher Education Proclamation (650/2009) sought to transform such unorganised structures at public universities and other forms of quality care activities at private higher education institutions into a designated institutional quality enhancement structures with provisions for the responsibility for monitoring and enhancing the quality of higher education institutions.

The audit exercises enabled higher education institutions to receive constructive feedback on their strengths and aspects of their performance in need of further development. The findings of the audits revealed critical shortcomings in the quality

of several necessary educational inputs and gaps in curriculum review procedures (Lodesso, 2012). However, as the account provided by Geda (2014, p. 308) indicates, the implementation of findings from the institutional quality audits were challenging due to some degree of resistance from higher education institutions, since such audit requirements were a relatively new phenomenon. This led to gaps in assessing implementation of feedback from audits (Lodesso, 2012).

6.5 Elements of the Ethiopian quality assurance system

In response to the sever quality problems observed in the higher education system, the current quality assurance system employs external and internal mechanisms of for monitoring quality and standards at national and institutional levels. The external quality assurance mainly involves monitoring and oversight by the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), a national quality assurance agency funded by and accountable to the Ministry of Education. In addition to the annual budget allocated to it by the government, the agency is authorised to use other sources of income such as fund collected as provided by law and from service charges and donations (FDRE, 2003, Art. 85). The agency is authorised by the higher education proclamations (351/2003) and (650/2009) to supervise and monitor the relevance and quality of higher education in all higher education institutions operating in the country. On one hand, the quality assurance agency serves to ensure that higher education institutions remain accountable to the government, students, employers and the public through monitoring and reporting on the status of quality and academic standards at higher education institutions. The agency is expected to safeguard internal and external stakeholders against fraudulent higher education institutions by ensuring that certain minimum standards of quality are fulfilled. On the other hand, the agency is expected to support quality improvement of higher education institutions through spreading quality and quality assurance practices, setting strategies for quality assurance, defining quality targets and academic standards, distributing tools and instruments for carrying out quality evaluations, coordinating the quality assurance efforts of higher education institutions, providing feedback and recommendations to higher education institutions valuable for their improvement work, and following up the progress of institutions.

The higher education proclamations (650/2009), Article 89, defines the powers and duties of the agency. Some of the key sub-articles include the following:

- Develop and implement clearly designed evaluation and accreditation criteria and procedures (FDRE, 2009, Art. 89 [1])
- Evaluate the activities, relevance and quality of education and training of any institution on the basis of which accreditation and renewal of accreditation shall be given (FDRE, 2009, Art. 89 [3])
- Evaluate whether the relevance and quality enhancement system of institutions are capable of ensuring quality in higher education (FDRE, 2009, Art. 89 [4])
- Evaluate institutions to ensure their compliance with the standards of relevance and quality of education (FDRE, 2009, Art. 89 [9])
- Ensure that foreign institutions or their branches operating in Ethiopia are accredited in their country of origin and comply with the relevance and quality standards set by the higher education proclamation (FDRE, 2009, Art. 89 [12])

On the basis of these provisions, the quality assurance agency carries out various external quality assurance and validation activities. The table below presents the main evaluation and monitoring engagements of the quality assurance agency.

Table 3. External quality assurance by the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency

External quality assurance procedures					
Type of quality evaluation		Nature of requirement	Duration of validity	Sector	
				Public higher education institutions	Private higher education institutions
Quality audit	Institutional	Voluntary	5 years	Yes	Yes
	Programme	Voluntary	No fixed duration	Yes	Yes
Accreditation	Pre-accreditation permit	Mandatory	1 year	Exempted	Yes
	Accreditation permit	Mandatory	3 years	Exempted	Yes
	Re-accreditation or accreditation renewal	Mandatory	3 years	Exempted	Yes

(Source: Compiled by the author from a review of relevant literature)

As the table shows, there is difference in external quality assurance requirements applicable to public and private higher education institutions. The quality assurance agency employs different quality monitoring procedures whereby private higher education institutions are obliged to undergo accreditation (pre-accreditation, full-accreditation and re-accreditation evaluations) at programme level and quality audit at both programme and institutional levels. Accordingly, Teshome and Kebede (2009, p. 4) explain that pre-accreditation, accreditation and renewal of accreditation or re-accreditation permits are given to a private higher education institution to function for a specific period based on an assessment of the institution's programmes by experts from selected higher education institutions and quality assurance agency mainly on the basis of human, material input and curriculum the higher education institution has put in place. The evaluation criteria develop in an incremental manner as an institution progresses from pre-accreditation stage to accreditation and subsequently to renewal of accreditation permits. The accreditation of programmes in the private sector also takes into account the higher education institution as a whole.

However, the notion of accreditation as implemented by the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia is different from international practice. An international review of the roles and functions of the quality assurance agency highlight that the process employed by the agency to accredit private higher education institutions and their programmes 'is actually one of licensing or registration' than a proper practice of accreditation which is commonly based on past performance, thereby suggesting that the term 'reaccreditation' rather than accreditation would be a more accurate description of the agency's current practices (Henson et al., 2016, p. 13).

In contrast to such stringent regulation of private higher education institutions, public institutions are exempted from accreditation formalities and are only expected to engage in institutional quality audits. Public institutions are required to go through self-evaluation once every five years following which the external review and recommendation for improvement are given to the institution. Such privileges extend even to newly established and young public universities while all private higher education institutions of all types and age are subjected to programme accreditation (Kahsay, 2012; Woldetensae, 2009). Public higher education institutions are granted autonomy by the higher education proclamation to start new programmes through internal procedures of curriculum development, review and approval without requirements for accreditation (FDRE, 2009, Art. 17 [2/a]). This shows the limited mandate the quality assurance agency has on public higher education institutions. The dichotomous approach of quality assurance to public and

private higher education institutions is discussed in detail in the section on major criticisms of the current quality assurance system.

The external quality evaluations involve self-evaluation undertaken by higher education institutions, peer review by panels recruited by the quality assurance agency, site visit, publication of report, recommendations for improvement are given, development of improvement plan by higher education institutions, and follow up activities by the quality assurance agency.

The external quality assurance activities of the quality assurance agency are supported with internal procedures, practices and processes of quality monitoring at higher education institutions. The current quality assurance system seems to take self-evaluation carried out by higher education institutions at its centre, since accreditation and audit evaluations and other internal quality assessments involve self-evaluations (Kahsay, 2012). The higher education proclamation (650/2009) Article 22 broadly highlights the nature and scope of institutional quality enhancement at higher education institutions. Below are selected key mandates;

- Every higher education institution shall have a reliable internal system for quality enhancement that shall be continuously improved (FDRE, 2009, Art. 22 [1])
- Internal system of quality enhancement of every institution shall provide for clear and comprehensive measures of quality covering professional development of academic staff, course contents, teaching-learning processes, student evaluation, assessment and grading systems, which shall also include student evaluation of course contents together with the methods and systems of delivery, assessment, examinations and grading (FDRE, 2009, Art. 22 [2])
- Institutions shall develop quality standards, undertake academic audit on a periodic basis, follow up and rectify the deficiencies revealed by the audit, and maintain appropriate documentation of the audit, activities undertaken and of the ensuing results, and submit such documentations regularly to the quality assurance agency (FDRE, 2009, Art. 22 [4])

As can be deduced from the above provisions, institutional quality enhancement tends to be predominantly geared towards serving the teaching and learning function of higher education institutions in contrast to research and community engagement.

Internal quality assurance units play a key role in developing plans for improving the quality of institutional operations based on the recommendations given by peer reviewers in accreditation and audit evaluations. The responsibility for taking

systematic measures to enhance the quality of core institutional functions is left to higher education institutions (Geda, 2014). Accordingly, the proclamation requires higher education institutions to assume the main responsibility for giving practical effect to appropriate recommendations by the quality assurance agency on quality enhancement measures that have to be taken (FDRE, 2009, Art. 22 [5]). Such requirements indicate the 'nature of accountability and power relations' between higher education institutions and the government (Kahsay, 2012, p. 231). Internal quality assurance practices are expected to serve as the basis for continuous quality improvement processes.

As discussed in the previous sections, the establishment of formal quality assurance practices is however a relatively recent phenomenon in the Ethiopian higher education and studies suggest that internal quality assurance is still at early stage of development at most higher education institutions (Abebe, 2014; Kahsay, 2012). Strong institutional commitment and extensive efforts are needed to address challenges in successfully institutionalising and stimulating robust internal quality assurance practices, procedures and practices at higher education institutions.

Despite no explicitly stated, the interpretation of the general mandates granted to the quality assurance agency and policy objectives set for higher education that focus on student learning and responsiveness of higher education to national development needs and demands of the labour market suggest that the quality assurance system at national and institutional level corresponds to a blend of working conceptualisations of quality as fitness for purpose and transformation (Kahsay, 2012, p. 113). In practice, the quality assurance practices and processes in place seem to focus more on the fitness for purpose perspective of understanding quality and employing procedures for its assurance.

In consistency with international practices, external quality evaluations in Ethiopia are not linked to funding and ranking (Kahsay, 2012). The literature suggests that the outcomes of quality evaluations are typically not explicitly tied to funding and ranking practices (Thune, 1997; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). It is a desirable and common practice for external evaluations to be accompanied by structured follow up processes within higher education institutions that assist internal development work rather than governments taking direct actions based on a judgement upon the outcomes of external quality evaluations (Billing, 2004). It is argued that quality assurance can be more effective and lead to institutional transformation and change when it is linked less to funding and performance indicators (Kells, 1995). This is important since the coercive pressures of funding, ranking and other forms of sanctions may lead higher education institutions to engage in playing the quality game

and deploy deceptive tactics to influence the outcomes of external quality evaluations (Harvey, 1998; Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Currently, an international review found that the staff of the quality assurance agency tends to prefer a longer process of accreditation thinking that it may prevent such deceptive practices by private higher education institutions (Henson et al., 2016). Moreover, the review suggested that the processes of accreditation and licensing should be primarily built on trust.

Additionally, the quality assurance agency is tasked with the responsibility for ensuring the relevance of higher education. This mandate entails the agency to actively work on ensuring that education and training delivered in higher education institutions can sufficiently equip students with useful theoretical knowledge and practical problem-solving skills and that programmes are carefully designed to respond to labour market demands and national development needs (Ashcroft, 2003). The higher education proclamation (650/2009), Article 89, sub-article 5, stipulates that the quality assurance agency's duty to 'ensure that higher education and training offered at any institution are in line with economic, social and other relevant policies of the country' (FDRE, 2009, Art. 89 [5]). Additionally, Article 79, sub-article 1 (b) (4) makes provisions for the quality assurance agency to examine the 'scale of relevance of research activities' (FDRE, 2009). The relevance of higher education also places emphasis on students and community orientation of higher education institutions. However, a review by a team of international experts found that the engagement of the quality assurance agency is limited and insufficient to meet the needs of national higher education strategy (Henson et al., 2016). The review team also recommended that the responsibility for ensuring relevance of higher education to be moved to the Ministry of Education and the word 'relevance' to be removed from the title of the agency, since it tends to 'overstate' the extent of its current activities and that combining a mandate for quality with broad relevance agenda 'confuses too very distinct functions' (p. 9). Additionally, the quality assurance agency also carries out other activities such as determining the equivalence of qualifications issued by foreign institutions and certifying the authenticity of credentials issued by domestic higher education institutions (FDRE, 2009, Art. 89 [14]).

6.6 Overview of the relationship between government and higher education institutions in Ethiopia

The relationship between governments and higher education institutions can have direct implications for higher education systems such as Ethiopia's where quality assurance agencies are established with statutes and are funded by and accountable to Ministries of Education or other relevant organs of government responsible for overseeing higher education. In such cases, government policies, priorities and agendas may be reflected in the governance and operations of quality assurance agencies. The relationship between higher education institutions and the quality assurance agency can thus be perceived as a part of the broader government-university relationship, since the quality assurance agency serve as an intermediary between the government and higher education institutions.

This section presents a brief overview of how the relationship between governments and higher education institutions in Ethiopia evolved through three systems of administrations. The practice of issuing decrees and other structured legislations for the purpose of regulating the education sector has existed in different regimes in the course of Ethiopia's modern history. The discussion is expected to provide further insights into the nature of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and efforts of quality monitoring in higher education.

6.6.1 Imperial administration, pre-1974

Ethiopia's first secular higher education institution was granted substantial autonomy, by 'Haile Selassie-I University Charter' (no. 284/1961), in matters of institutional administration, financial and material management and a range of other issues, insofar as they were deemed to be necessary to the attainment of its missions (Kahsay, 2012). The degree of financial autonomy, that is, the power to collect revenue, borrow, allocate, save, invest, spend, lend, or contract into financial arrangements was particularly extensive (Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1961, Art. 3).

The board of governors was granted high degree of autonomy in academic management (Art. 15, 25-31), human resources and staffing and salary (Art. 7). The exception to this was the strong say that the emperor himself and his council of ministers had on the composition of the university senior management, such as the appointment of university presidents and vice presidents (Art. 7 [c], 17, 23), five of

the eight members of the board (Art. 4/b) and members of the Advisory Committee on higher education (Art. 11). The system of university administration provided an opportunity for the participation of student, alumni and relevant external stakeholders representation in the board.

Although serious discussions on the quality of higher education had not yet emerged into the public limelight, the Charter clearly indicated the desire and commitment of the imperial government to assure that the education provided in its higher education institution was equivalent to international standards (Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1961). It made provisions for internal practices and mechanisms of regulating the standards and quality of education, for instance, through regulating the admission of students, methods of assessment, general standards for granting degrees and other academic credentials (Art. 15 [c, g, h]), requiring at least two-third of the teaching staff in any faculty to be working on a full-time basis (Art. 26 [b]), and prohibiting the appointment of individuals to academic staff who are not fully qualified in the subjects they are engaged to teach, lack proficiency in teaching and incapable of conducting research (Art. 28). Such provisions systematically geared towards an autonomous checking of academic standards by the academia, but this may not mean, as in most cases, a functional proxy of formal quality assurance. It is important to acknowledge possible differences between such an encouraging legislative framework and its implementation.

In his historical analysis, Asgedom (2008) argues that the notion of a ‘university for society’ more suitably characterises the higher education system of the imperial government, wherein universities were granted considerable autonomy and academic freedom that was essential for properly carrying out their missions, and, simultaneously, required to remain socially accountable. Higher education institutions were, thus, autonomous but responsible for providing socially relevant services.

However, the relationship that institutions had with the state were strained in the latter periods of the imperia government, when university teachers and students and the educated segments of the population in general took the leading role in the political protests that eventually led to the takeover by the military (Asgedom, 2008; Kebede, 2006). The desire for rapidly modernising Ethiopia predominantly through adopting Westernisation and Western education system along with its curricula, teaching staff and socio-economic and political influence, was argued to have aided the gradual marginalisation and uprooting of the traditional Ethiopian education, institutions and value system (Kebede, 2006). Such discontent with the education

policy in part played a role in the subsequent revolution that was led by the ideology of socialism.

6.6.2 The socialist military Dergue administration, 1974 - 1991

The Higher Education Institutions Administration Proclamation (no. 109/1977) issued by the Provisional Military Administration underlined the need for higher education to increasingly play a central role in producing trained manpower, building capacity in science and technology, facilitating the progress of the country and the emerging socialist ideology and politically-charged tasks of raising the living, educational and cultural standard of the 'oppressed masses' and assisting in the struggle against 'feudalism, imperialism and bureaucratic capitalism' (Provisional Military Administration Council, 1977, Art. 3). The need to expand access to higher education was at the core of this reform unlike the elitist form of higher education during the imperial government (Wagaw, 1979).

An interesting historical study conducted by Asgedom (2008) suggests that the notion of a 'university of society' have considerable significance in understanding the nature of the higher education system of the socialist military government. Serving the needs of society was understood to be the primarily purpose for the existence of higher education institutions. The principle of academic freedom and institutional autonomy were regarded as less relevant, if not harmful, in comparison to the priority attached to utilising higher education as an instrument to pull the nation out of poverty and backwardness and advance the ideological struggle against imperialism. Higher education institutions, thus, increasingly became controlled by the state.

The Higher Education Institutions Administration Proclamation criticised the imperial system of administration of higher education institutions as being 'uncoordinated' and highlighted the need to reorganise and centralise administration (Provisional Military Administration Council, 1977). The Higher Education Commission was set up to oversee the administration of higher education institutions and monitor efforts towards the achievement of the objectives set for higher education. Such reforms sought to tighten regulation on what was considered at the time to be loose, unplanned and uncoordinated functions of higher education institutions. Unlike the imperial administration, the council of Higher Education Commission had, within it, more representation of key sectors of the government.

The strongly centralised system of administering higher education institutions revoked the considerable degree autonomy that institutions used to exercise with respect to managing their academic, organisation of internal administration, finances, human resources and property, external relations and international collaboration. This power, previously entrusted with the higher education institutions and their academic units, was then clearly transferred to the hands of the Commission (Art. 7).

The state penetrated the higher education arena with cadres, politicisation and militarisation processes to ensure ideological control and identify potential opposition forces within the members of university academic communities (Asgedom, 2008). Higher education institutions fell under the domination of political power that heavily regulated, if not deterred, their academic and managerial structures, processes and activities. This could be seen as the period where the practice of external control, regulation and monitoring of higher education institutions and their activities was engrained in the essence of Ethiopian higher education.

Consistent with the directions of such bold transformations was an interesting development that saw the introduction of external actors, mechanisms and processes of regulating the standards and level of the performance of higher education institutions, quality of the education, research and other services they provide, standards of students admitted into programmes and quantity and quality of graduates they produce (Provisional Military Administration Council, 1977, Art. 7). The shift from internal mechanisms of quality regulation entrusted with the academic management of higher education institutions to an external entity exercising rigid regulation on quality and standards had strong implications for the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions.

The advent of external mechanism of regulating higher education institutions and the quality of education introduced the practice of externally regulating student recruitment and admission, standards and conditions of granting degrees, undertaking of education and research in accordance with national development plans, establishment and cancellation of study programmes and, most importantly, the practice of accrediting higher education institutions and conducting periodic evaluations of institutions. However, the researcher learnt the absence of ample

documentary evidence that could confirm whether such provisions had been fully implemented⁷².

Although the imperial and socialist military administrations were guided by radically opposite political and economic ideology, the education system had comparatively and visibly deteriorated during reign of the socialist administration. It saw academic processes repeatedly interrupted, academic standards declined, quality of education deteriorated and discipline, motivation and competence of students and teaching staff weakened (Asgedom, 2008). The dissatisfaction with the deteriorating standards of education became intense towards the collapse of the socialist regime (Aberra, 2019; Asgedom, 2008).

6.6.3 The current administration, post-1991

The current government led by the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has followed an ideology of revolutionary democracy with interests in a developmental state model to rapidly lift the nation out of poverty through economic, social and political transformation⁷³. Education in general and higher education in particular began to be increasingly seen as key instruments to advance the overall national development. The administration created conducive environment that fostered the expansion of higher education institutions in both the public and private sectors. The government made substantial investment into constructing new public universities across the country in four rounds and expanding the in-take capacity of existing institutions. The issue of quality gained attention alongside equity and widening access to the previously marginalised segments of population. The economy opened up for investment in the private sector that led to the proliferation of private higher education institutions.

In contrast to a rigid, centralised and politically dominated setting of the socialist military administration, the higher education proclamation (650/2009) in use during the current administration grants autonomy to higher education institutions in academic, managerial, financial and staffing aspects of their operations. It formally grants institutions academic freedom in pursuit of core missions consistent with

⁷² The evidence gathered from the interviews and focus group discussions substantiated the existence of earlier forms of accrediting and regulating the quality of higher education institutions by Addis Ababa University and Ministry of Education. More information on this can be found in Chapter Nine, section 9.2.1.

⁷³ Since 2018, the EPRDF was restructuring as Prosperity Party and began to introduce political, economic and social reforms that significantly incorporate the characteristics of a neoliberal ideology.

international good practices and culture of social responsibility (Art. 16 [1, 2, 3]). The academic autonomy extends to developing study programmes, determining graduation, undertaking research and community service, engaging in joint academic and research activities with domestic and international partners and awarding academic qualifications and prizes (Art. 8 [2, 3, 8]). Public higher education institutions have autonomy to develop and implement curricula, open and close existing programmes (Art. 17 [2/a]). Their private counterparts are, however, required to fulfil pre-accreditation, accreditation and re-accreditation requirements to open programmes (Art. 79 [1]) due to the dichotomous approaches in quality assurance. Differences also exist between the two sectors in how admission procedures are implemented although the Ministry of Education withholds the authority to administer university entrance examination and determine admissions to any higher education institutions (Art. 39 [2]). Private institutions have the right to recruit and admit students into their programmes in accordance with criteria set by the Ministry of Education. Public higher education institutions, however, exercise similar autonomy only in admissions to graduate and postgraduate programmes (Art. 39 [b]), but the placement of students to undergraduate programmes is centrally administered by the Ministry.

In regards to quality, the current government introduced the practice of external quality assurance through establishing the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), with the help of proclamation (351/2003), to supervise the relevance and quality of higher education at national level and, later, internal quality assurance practices through proclamation (650/2009) that required all higher education institutions to establish institutional quality enhancement mechanisms. These measures introduced formal quality assurance at national and institutional levels to address the growing concerns over the deteriorating quality standards.

The managerial autonomy granted by the proclamation to higher education institutions include determining organisational structure, enacting and implementing internal rules and procedures and establishing collaboration with industries and other institutions (Art. 8 [5, 7], 17 [2/a]). This extends to the authority to nominate presidents, vice presidents, members of the board and select and appoint leaders of academic units and departments (Art. 17 [2/a]).

However, the government is criticised for administrative and political interferences in higher education institutions (Shaw, 2018). For instance, the Ministry fired the presidents of Hawassa University and Dilla University, for travelling abroad without its permission and failing to organise the necessary preparations for a government-initiated training for students and academic staff (Abiy, 2016). A total

of 40 senior academics of Addis Ababa University were summarily fired by the government to stifle critical voices (Asgedom, 2008; Tamrat & Teferra, 2018).

Moreover, public and private higher education institutions are not regulated in an entirely similar approach due to the significant differences that exist in funding, nature of accountability and specific forms of autonomy applicable to each sector. Nevertheless, both public and private institutions are required to be accountable to the Ministry of Education.

Higher education institutions are granted limited financial autonomy to manage funds and property, prepare and implement plans and budget (Art. 8 [6], 17 [2/e]). While public institutions are nearly fully funded by the federal government, private institutions rely entirely on the financial capital and funds generated from non-public sources, private capital or associations. Although Article 62, sub-article 1, makes a provision for public institutions to receive a block-grant budget, its implementation has been delayed for years. Currently, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development allocates budget to each public university based on a consideration of four main categories namely 'teaching and learning, research and development, community service, and administration' (Garomssa, 2016, p. 78). The proclamation obliges public institutions to keep the unutilised portion of allocated block-grant as budget subsidy for use only as capital budget and the subsidy to be budgeted together with the year's block-grant and other incomes of the institution (Art. 63). Although universities generate additional income from tuition fee in programmes delivered in non-regular modalities, providing consultancy and training services and operating business enterprises, they still substantially rely on state funding (Garomssa, 2016).

The power of higher education institutions to borrow, save, spend, invest, lend, or contract into any financial arrangements is significantly restricted. Additionally, higher education institutions are required to report donations, funds received from third parties and investment incomes (Art. 62 [8]). The provisions on financial autonomy, as can be deduced, seem to be relatively limited than autonomy in academic affairs. Public universities have continued to be subjected to significant financial and managerial regulations (Geda, 2014).

Higher education institutions are granted staffing autonomy to recruit and administer their academic and other staff (administrative and technical and support staff) (Art. 8, 17). All institutions are required to develop institutional rules and procedures for the employment and promotion of academic staff (Art. 30 [2b]).

6.6.4 Inconsistencies between formal autonomy and autonomy in use

Significant inconsistencies exist between the level of formal autonomy granted to higher education institutions by the proclamation (650/2009) and other legislative frameworks and the autonomy in use (Ahmedin, 2018; Areaya, 2008; Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). Although the degree of overall autonomy and academic freedom has significantly increased when compared to the situation during the socialist military government, the current government still struggles to fully implement the extensive autonomy stipulated in the proclamation, partly to minimise the difficulty in regulating the relevance and quality of education, ensuring equity issues, monitoring institutional performance and accountability in resource unitisation (Ashcroft, 2003). Additionally, the gap between the policy and practice can also be explained by the weak institutional capacity to implement the provisions stipulated in the proclamation and other legislative frameworks and the low enforcement and compliance (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). A recent study also shows that the legislations ratified by parliament lack public trust due to low public participation in the law-making processes (Tsege, 2019a). This could imply that legislations, policies and strategic frameworks pertaining to various aspects of higher education lack public trust due to their approval by the parliament with inadequate participation of stakeholders and the public, thus, weakening their effective implementation.

The education system of the incumbent government is often criticised for a number of contradictions between, such as the government's political rhetoric of exercising an adequate bottom-up approach and the reality of a more centralised top-down orientation, the political and professional roles of those appointed to leadership and management positions at both the national and institutional levels, the inadequate capacity for implementing policies and reforms and the multi-faceted obstacles that the politicisation of education creates (Areaya, 2008). The substantial autonomy and academic freedom stipulated in the proclamation has not, in practice, halted the coercive pressure from the government on higher education institutions. In fact, a trend of increasing legal-rational and bureaucratic forms of authorities are observed within Ethiopian higher education (Abebe, 2015a). In a number of cases, the government has initiated governance reform agendas with the characteristics of business management tools, such as the Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), Balanced Scorecard (BSC)⁷⁴ and, more recently, the Kaizen philosophy and

⁷⁴ On the contrary, the literature indicates that the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) has been widely applied in public and non-public organisations including higher education institutions to improve management

Deliverology. A study shows that such tools that are perceived by the academic community as inappropriate and incompatible with the culture, organisation and the mode of functioning of higher education institutions have been imposed externally on public universities, thereby leading to symbolic compliance by universities for the sake of ensuring survival and legitimacy rather than genuine implementation driven by the strategic interest to enhance efficiency and effectiveness (Mehari, 2016). The series of Civil Service Reform Programmes and capacity building support programmes launched by the government also extended public universities. A study on state-higher education institutions relationship found that governance reforms in Ethiopian higher education are mainly characterised by the dominance of the state and compliance of higher education institutions that compromises the academic, organisational, managerial, financial and staffing autonomy of institutions (Hailu, 2018; Mehari, 2010). In contrast to the imperial and socialist military regimes where the state remained to be the sole influential actor shaping the higher education system, the current administration has created space for market to play a significant role (Gebremeskel & Feleke, 2016).

The higher education enrolment policy set for a 70:30 composition between natural sciences and technology fields and social sciences and humanities respectively, and the strategies developed for the higher education sector on basis of the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) I and II can be seen as additional examples of government imposed policy directions (Shaw, 2018).

The government has continued to influence the policy agendas and priorities of higher education institutions through legislations and resource allocation (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018; Tesfaye, 2019). For instance, the government has announced about two major changes to be implemented soon. First, the newly publicised education and training roadmap study is expected to lead to a structural reorganisation of the Ministry of Education under three separate ministerial offices, responsible for general education, higher education and vocational education, and skills and job creation (Yosuf, 2018). Second, in line with the recommendations made in the education roadmap study, the Ministry planned to reorganise universities in 2019/20 academic year into three main categories: research universities, teaching universities and polytechnic universities (Hussien, 2019a). However, the Ministry and its Reform Council of Higher Education later made some adjustments and officially unveiled, four categories of public universities based on mission and excellence, which

of core functions, and that if designed and implemented carefully, the model can be congruent with the input, process and output dimensions of quality assurance, support strategic objectives and enhance communication in higher education institutions (e.g. Reda, 2017).

comprised ‘8 research universities, 15 applied universities, 21 general universities, and 3 specialised higher education institutions’ (Kassahun, 2020; “Ministry Classifies Universities According to Excellence,” 2020). The final classification seems to have some inconsistency with the previous proposal included in the education roadmap study and the stipulations considered in the draft revision of the higher education proclamation that only recognise ‘research or applied science and academic’ (FDRE, 2019, Art. 6 [2])⁷⁵.

Regardless of confusions on the actual categories, the underlying rationale for the proposed reorganisation seem to focus on the understanding that the current system, where all universities provide training in almost all fields of study, was found to lack adequate consideration of comparative institutional advantages and infrastructural capacities of universities, aggravate the challenges universities face in ensuring high quality training in comprehensive fields and contribute to inefficiency in public resource distribution. The study instead proposed that existing universities should be restructured according to demarcated missions and areas of excellence such that, for example, universities with relatively better human resources and facilities conducive for research to become research universities whereas universities with programmes that integrate theory with practical learning to become polytechnic universities, and the remaining universities to focus on teaching comprehensive subjects (Hussien, 2019a). However, the decision to implement such reorganisations without sufficient time for necessary preparations, developing mutual understanding and clarity over strategic objectives with stakeholders, and dialogue with universities casts doubt as to how effective the proposed reform will be.

Moreover, the current education policy and nature of relationship between higher education institutions and state and society is criticised for infringing up on institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions, although not as dire as the situation during the socialist military government, while at the same time acknowledging the value in the continued orientation towards social accountability and the need to contribute to overall national development objectives (Asgedom, 2008). Despite such intentions, the current system is criticised for lack of meaningful partnership, understanding and trust between higher education institutions and state. Internally, the criticism draws attention to increasing political divisions and tension along ethnic denominations, lack of consensus and constructive discussion within the community of academics, deteriorating intellectual culture and autonomous thinking, and disruptive state interference in

⁷⁵ This sub-article was later excluded from the version of the revised proclamation approved by the Council of Ministers and adopted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

internal affairs of higher education institutions. Widespread suspicion and distrust exist between students, academic staff and university administration (Shaw, 2018).

Additionally, the current trend arguably resembles the characteristics of a 'state-controlled system' where increasing mandatory practices for ensuring accountability are imposed on higher education institutions, such as strategic plan agreement, financial audit, financial management, quality audit and accreditation, and reporting and supervision (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018, p. 3). The antagonism and tension between higher education institutions and state during the early 2000s resulted in the state taking an approach which tightened the grip on higher education institutions, whereby the state introduced a number of measures such as prescribing a series of governance and operational reforms, curricular reforms, regulating the admission and placement of students, centralising recruitment of academic staff and terms of employment contract, prescribing teaching and assessment methods, setting requirements for degrees, and other more direct accountability and control instruments. This could be partly to ensure that higher education institutions are effectively held accountable to internal and external stakeholders and national development needs (Eshete, 2008). It has however substantially constrained the managerial autonomy and self-steering capacity of public universities (Garomssa, 2016). As a result, Asgedom (2008) argues that the existing form of relationship between higher education institution and government does not fully represent the notion of 'university for society', but instead more of a characterisation of a university of 'crisis' (p. 44).

Political motive as a source of tension and distrust

Politics, in part, accounts for the distrust and suspicion of government towards higher education institutions. Historically, Ethiopian higher education institutions have had strained relationship with governments mainly due to their tendency to be centres of critique and sources of opposition to established political agendas of government. For example, university students and teachers protested during the imperial government against feudalism and demanded radical land reform. Later, intellectuals in universities directed an opposition against the provisional military administration and called for immediate transition to a republic and democratic system. During the incumbent government, academic community in universities took the lead in the protest against the official result of the 2005 election which declared the ruling party victors despite a widespread popular support to the coalition of opposition. These and other expressions of opposition against

governments have been at the centre of the strained and entangled relationship that Ethiopian higher education institutions have had with the imperial, military and the incumbent ethnic-based federalist governments. This feeds the tendency of the government for maintaining a tight grip on the internal affairs of higher education institutions.

Universities in Ethiopia have been 'both a victim and perpetrator of political violence' through the years (Asgedom, 2008, p. 21). Violent and brutal crackdown of student protests and silencing of dissent by the armed security forces of the government vividly show the extent of political repression, and this has tainted the success achieved in expanding the higher education sector (O'Keeffe, 2014). Politically motivated firing of academics and appointment of university leaders including presidents, vice-presidents and deans has presented a threat to autonomy of higher education institutions and academic freedom (Asgedom, 2008; Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). It has also become commonplace for the incumbent government to actively recruit members to its ruling coalition from the community of academic staff and students and hold party meetings within the campus premises (O'Keeffe, 2014). The increasing interference of politics in academia is also seen still even in the recent directive that permitted higher education institutions to recruit relevant personnel to leadership positions on grounds of merit which, for instance, included, at least in the case of Addis Ababa University's recruitment its president, the evaluation of proposals that each candidate was required to submit plans for addressing the political questions raised by students and managing the frequent violence in campus premises ("How Should Universities Respond to Political Questions Raised by Students?," 2018).

Further intensifying the existing distrust of the government towards higher education institutions, media reports indicate that universities are increasingly becoming instruments of political struggle and hotbed of intolerance (Aberra, 2019; Ashine, 2019; Gardner, 2020; Tenagne, 2017), where academic staff and students are alleged to be the principal culprits in inciting ethnic-based violence that resulted in loss of life, injuries, abduction, destruction of university facilities and repeated interruptions in teaching-learning processes. A study found that factors that impede the development of positive intergroup relations in Ethiopian higher education institutions include ethnic and religious composition of students, language and ethnic-based friendships, political party membership, and prejudice, stereotypes and ethnocentrism (Adamu, 2014, pp. 99-110). Some intellectuals argue that the recent political instability and ethnic-based violence grappling higher education institutions is partly caused by the current system of centrally placing students and, in some cases,

leaders, to higher education institutions, since this has been heavily influenced by the ethnic makeup of respective region's and hence lacks an ethnically comprehensive national composition of students, academic staff and support staff (Adamu, 2014; Begashaw, 2019; Gardner, 2020). These intellectuals have urged this practice of central placement to be revised. Such suggestions note the importance of guarding student union organisations and recruitment of personnel into leadership positions from the influence of ethnic identity and political affiliation (Aberra, 2019).

Recent reports suggest such ethnic-based violence and political instabilities substantially affected as many as 22 universities, most located in Amhara and Oromia regional states, at the height of the turmoil (Gebremariam, 2019; HERQA, 2018e; "Ministry Working to Return 35,000 Students Who Left Campuses," 2020). Media reports suggest that an ethnic-based violence that erupts in one university tends to quickly spread to other universities around the country (Aberra, 2019; Aderaw, 2020a; Gardner, 2020; Hussien, 2020a; Tsege, 2019b; "Universities Shaken With Fear," 2019; Yared, 2019). Since December of 2017, the Center for Rights and Democracy (CARD) and National Endowment for Democracy (NED) have documented at least 9 rounds of violence which occurred at university campuses and spread to other universities (Ashine, 2019; Gardner, 2020). Higher education institutions have become prone to violent incidents since their campuses are the home grounds of closer contacts between members of different communities (Gardner, 2020; Yibeltal, 2019).

Higher education institutions and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education⁷⁶ responded to the intensifying violence by taking administrative and disciplinary measures including issuing warning, suspending staff and students and pressing charges in the court (Aderaw, 2020a; "How Should Universities Respond to Political Questions Raised by Students?," 2018; Hussien, 2019e, 2020b, 2020c; Mekonnen, 2020; Tsege, 2019b; Yohannes, 2019). A good example of this can be the administrative measures that Wollo University, Gondar University, Bahir Dar University, Dire Dawa University, Jimma University and Haramaya University recently took against a sum of over 470 students and staff ("Four Universities Took Administrative Measures Against Students and Staff," 2020). Latest reports from the

⁷⁶ The government has recently reorganised ministerial offices. Accordingly, Ministry of Education became responsible for managing only general education, and a new ministry namely, Ministry of Science and Higher Education has been created with a mandate for higher education and technical and vocational education and training. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education was established in October 2018 by proclamation (no. 1097/2018), having one principal minister supported by two state ministers. It should be noted that all references made to the Ministry of Education in this dissertation concern the period before the ministerial reorganisation, where the ministry used to be responsible for administering the entire education system, including higher education.

Ministry indicate that measures have been taken against a total of about 640 students, 40 members of teaching staff, and more than 240 members of administrative and support staff (“Ministry Working to Return 35,000 Students Who Left Campuses,” 2020). Another approach has been temporarily suspending the operations of conflict-prone higher education institutions until the crisis deescalates (Endashaw, 2019). The Ministry seems to base its approaches on its categorisation of public universities into three: universities that have not experienced violence, universities where conflict broke out but quickly regained stability, and universities experiencing continuous conflict (“Five Students Dead Following Conflict,” 2019). An additional measure taken recently also includes a directive set by the Ministry for public universities to be guarded by the federal police force rather than by local militia to improve campus security (“Universities to be Guarded by Federal Police,” 2019). Some universities have also installed security cameras on campus, digital identification for students and enforced curfews (Gardner, 2020).

In a recent meeting organised by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to discuss the expansion of recurring ethnic-based violence at universities with board members and presidents of universities as well as stakeholders, the Prime Minister warned that government will take ‘measures to the extent of shutting down universities if leadership at all levels and the community [where universities are located] fail to bring stability to the institution’ (“Prime Minister Warns of Shutting Down Universities,” 2019; Yared, 2019). Others disagree with such ideas, further pointing to the long-lasting damages such measures can instigate, and instead, call for stakeholders to work towards a sustainable solution to the problem (Ashenafi, 2019; “Five Students Dead Following Conflict,” 2019; “Universities Should Not be Hotbeds of Lawlessness,” 2019).

Interestingly, amidst such chaos and urgency to restore stability, less attention has been given to the issue that the recurring violence and conflict in public higher education institutions risks further deteriorating the already dipping quality and standards of higher education in the country (Aberra, 2019). The instability poses threat to the safety of students and staff and the academic atmosphere needed for education and research to flourish. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education and management of public universities have recently concentrated their efforts on containing the violence, restoring peace and stability, and returning large number of university students who left campuses due to security threat (“Ministry Working to Return 35,000 Students Who Left Campuses,” 2020). Meanwhile, quality of education and student learning continue to be the silent victim of politics, political

violence and government crackdown on protests grappling public universities in Ethiopia.

Moreover, the widespread political violence and chaos at the campuses of public universities is reported to have started driving students, particularly from families that can afford tuition, to opt to private higher education institutions that are generally perceived to be safer (Mulugeta, 2019). More students are dropping out of public universities and enrolling at private higher education institutions, thus unlocking business opportunities in the private sector (Gardner, 2020; Mulugeta, 2019). In stark contrasts to public institutions, private higher education institutions have been more stable and safer amidst such periods of political unrest taking the nation by storm.

Instabilities and turmoil taking place in the political sphere have permeated higher education institutions as seen frequently in recent times and throughout successive political administrations (Aberra, 2019; “How Should Universities Respond to Political Questions Raised by Students?,” 2018; Yared, 2019). Currently, the crackdown on higher education institutions meant freedom to critique institutional and government policies, participate in an independent association of teachers and students, engage in anti-government movements such as boycotting classes and student protest are increasingly stifled, and subsequently fear, self-censorship and silence have become the trend (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018). Accordingly, the history of previous and contemporary politics that prevail in higher education institutions present obstacles to the development of a vibrant research culture (Ridley, 2011). However, such problems have roots in the politicisation of higher education which has been taking place across regimes and continually compromised the autonomy of higher education institutions (Aberra, 2019). The pressure of the ethnic sensitive politics of the incumbent government has intensified division and distrust among the academic community within higher education institutions (Asgedom, 2008).

Although the intrusion of politics into academia has been frequently criticised mainly among the academic community, the recent discussion that took place between the prime minister and the ministry of education and representatives of academics from universities following the recent political reforms in the country saw high level political leadership of the country openly acknowledge the problem and pledge to work to safeguard institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions, especially public ones. The discussion identified that the persistent political interference of the government in the operations of higher education intuitions, for instance forced ‘one-to-five’ organisation of students and academic staff, further intensified the government’s lack of trust in higher education

institutions and this has presented an obstacle to addressing the problem of quality in higher education (“Dr. Abiy Ahmed’s ‘push up’,” 2018). The prime minister however downplays the role of state political interference and instead points to the growing concerns of the government over the weak capacities of higher education institutions for bringing tangible impacts in the development of the nation.

Financial mismanagement as additional motive for lack of trust

In addition to politics and political motives, another reason that explains the insistence of the government in tightly regulating higher education institutions can be the severe deficiencies in the financial accountability of university. Media reports indicate that most public universities are among the public organisations of the country that are most notorious for gaps, shortcomings and inconsistencies in financial audits (Anberbir, 2019), which pointed to prevalent mismanagement, wastage, unlawful expenditure, and unaccounted funds of the federal budget (Abiy, 2019). Most notable, according to these reports, was the extent of financial malpractices at Samara University and Jigjiga University. The reports also stress the frustrating lack of progress and enforcement of regulations in the ensuring healthy financial management and accountability at higher education institutions. The report of the Federal Auditor General found several problems in the financial management of the Ministry of Education and public universities. These include budget misallocation and unlawful cross subsidisation of budget; over and under spending of earmarked budget; uncollected and overdue payments; hefty penalties paid to suppliers for failure to make payment on time according to contracts; irregularities in per diem and professional allowance payments; procurements made without proper institutional planning and an open bidding process as required by financial regulations; grants paid to university academic staff who are studying abroad neither with proper follow up on whether the recipients were actually attending their studies nor confirmation that the payment reached the recipients (Office of the Federal Auditor General, 2019). Interestingly, the audit found that huge sums of payments have been made to contractors even when the construction work of the new public universities had not started, particularly at Oda Bultum University, due to delays in acquiring land and settling compensation payments with local farmer who were uprooted from their land (Office of the Federal Auditor General, 2019). Moreover, the audit uncovered considerable mismanagement of properties and office facilities (Office of the Federal Auditor General, 2019).

Although such breaches of principles of responsible and legitimate functioning seem to justify the tendency of the government to distrust higher education institutions and prefer tight control, it is however crucial for the government to employ mechanisms that in the long run ensure external accountability without compromising institutional autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions (Tamrat & Teferra, 2018).

6.6.5 From central appointment to merit-based recruitment of leadership in public higher education institutions: Hope amidst doubts

In a much anticipated move in favour of a more meaningful institutional autonomy, the Ministry of Education has recently put an end to its long-held practice of appointing high level university leaders such as presidents and vice-presidents, to public higher education institutions and, instead, issued a directive in the beginning of 2017/18 academic year that grants permission to public institutions to fill such positions through merit-based open competition for a period of six years. The previous appointment of university leaders have for long been dictated by political loyalty and ethnic identity, and, as such, the practice has failed to curb corruption, rescue deteriorating quality of education, address challenges of academic staff or bring other benefits to higher education (Aberra, 2019; Ahmedin, 2018; Garomssa, 2016). The growing criticism of this practice led the Ministry of Education to issue a new directive, 002/2009⁷⁷, to guide the recruitment and appointment of leaders and administrators in public universities (Ahmedin, 2018).

The new directive makes it possible for anyone within or outside the academic community with a record of relevant education background, experience and solid strategic plan on how to improve the standard of core operations and resolve pressing institutional challenges to compete for the positions of leadership (Endashaw, 2017; “How Should Universities Respond to Political Questions Raised by Students?,” 2018). Paving the way for the newly introduced procedure are Bahir Dar University and Addis Ababa University which became the institutions who first implemented the directive and employed their new presidents.

Tainting the image of the new directive, however, the Ministry still seems to withhold the power to select and appoint the president from the list of promising candidates proposed by the boards of the universities. In these cases, the aforementioned universities appointed a committee that screened applicants and

⁷⁷ 2009 in Ethiopian calendar and 2017 in Gregorian calendar

selected a list of best candidates, and the board of the universities narrowed the selection to top three candidates and submitted the proposal to the Ministry for final decision (Endashaw, 2017; “Last Three Candidates for Presidency of Addis Ababa University,” 2018; Yared, 2018). This deviates from the notion of university boards independently screening and appointing leaders entirely free from the interference of the Ministry.

Moreover, the minister of Science and Higher Education issued a notice on 8th November 2018 which suspended all ongoing recruitment, selection and appointment of higher education leaders by higher education institution until gaps in the new directive identified and brought to the attention of the Ministry by various stakeholders are properly addressed and the directive is revised accordingly. More interestingly, the minister appointed a president to Debre Berhan University on the same day (Ahmedin, 2018). This raises a concern over the readiness and commitment of the government to grant autonomy to higher education institutions. In fact, literature recognises that governments may hold such ambiguous attitude, which combine a promise of granting more autonomy with maintaining control (Vroeijenstijn & Acherman, 1990). However, it is not clear whether the directive has been reinstated. Furthermore, higher education institutions would need to ensure that those leaders recruited through such merit-based approach will not continue to be subjected to the arbitrary dismissal of the Ministry, as it used to be the case with most public universities before the introduction of the new directive, for instance, the firing of presidents of Hawassa University and Dilla University (Abiy, 2016).

Despite the apparent limitations, the recently introduced approach is in the long run expected to attract a pool of relatively better competent and experienced individuals to key positions of leadership and management at public higher education institutions. It could also enhance the capacity of higher education institutions to tailor their leadership to pressing institutional needs and strategic aspirations. In contrast, private higher education institutions exercise relatively substantial autonomy when it comes to determining the structure and organisation of management and other key aspects pertaining to internal academic and administrative operations.

6.7 Conclusion

Ethiopia’s progress in widening the access to higher education since the mid-2000s has had considerable ramifications for quality standards. The introduction of

external quality assurance implemented by HERQA and internal practices of quality monitoring at higher education institutions thus intend to address the growing dissatisfaction with the falling quality standards. The quality concerns pervasive in the rapidly expanding higher education and national and international influences have shaped the fundamental purpose that external and internal quality assurance systems have been designed to address. Growing interests in ensuring effective regulation and accountability of institutions seem to constitute the key thrust behind the current quality assurance procedures, evaluations and requirements. The historical evolution of the relationship between higher education institutions and successive governments provides a broader context in which issues of trust and accountability in relation to quality and quality assurance can be explored in the Ethiopian higher education.

The insights from this chapter assist in further evaluating and affirming the relevance of the theoretical and analytical framework applied in the present study to guide empirical inquiry into the main research questions. Assessing the concern and commitment, institutional capacity and openness of higher education institutions and perceived risks they pose to quality constitute contextually relevant dimensions for exploring the extent to which HERQA may trust higher education institutions on issues pertaining to quality and quality assurance. These dimensions are argued to be applicable and justifiable for the purpose of this study. Additionally, the present study theorises that the extent of trust that HERQA places in higher education institutions in relation to quality and quality assurance may have significant implications for the nature of quality management model being implemented in the Ethiopian higher education. As such, the application of dichotomous accreditation requirements in public and private institutions which exempt the former and subject the latter to rigorous evaluations, and implementation of other restrictive regulations against private institutions are considered to likely signify contrasting perceived trustworthiness attributed to institutions in public and private sectors. The empirical investigation presented in Chapter Eight and Nine further venture a detailed analysis and evidence of such trends. The questions of autonomy and credibility of HERQA and objectivity of its approaches to public and private institutions can serve as additional relevant issues to extend the empirical exploration of trust and its implications for quality management. Perspectives in trust building, selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust and quality management models are employed in combination to assist in identifying and analysing implications of trust for the nature of quality management.

7 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the methodological approaches that guide the collection, analysis and interpretations of data to answer the research questions. The methodology chapter is positioned to redirect the focus of the dissertation on the empirical investigation of the research questions after the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the study have been adequately established based on an extensive literature review and the overview of the research context has been presented.

The chapter explores the interpretivism or constructionism research paradigm as an underlying philosophical orientation that guides the direction of the investigation. It then focuses on describing key aspects of its research design including the choice of qualitative design, multiple case study approach and inductive reasoning. The chapter also discusses procedures employed in selecting case institutions and respondents and components of the study sample. It also presents a brief overview of these case higher education institutions. The discussion then extends to the description of data collection instruments and summary of field work activities. Another issue addressed in this chapter is the discussion of thematic analysis as the main method employed in analysing data gathered through one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions and document review. The chapter also discusses how trustworthiness is addressed in this study through the strategies of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The study provides multiple rationale that establish adequate justifications for each of its methodological choices. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of ethical considerations that are addressed during the data collection, analysis and reporting of findings.

7.1 Interpretivism as a guiding research paradigm

Research paradigms guide how a given scientific research perceives reality and knowledge, and inform the selection of research methods, how data is collected and analysed, and the extent to which the findings can be generalised (Davies & Fisher, 2018). Research paradigms are basic belief systems that provide sets of assumptions

that encompass ethics (axiology), ontology, epistemology and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and human beings, while epistemology deals with the relationship between the researcher and the known or knowledge, and the question of methodology deals with identifying the best and suitable technique for gaining knowledge about the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Some of the commonly used research paradigms include positivism, postpositivism, interpretivism or constructionism, critical or transformative and pragmatism.

A careful evaluation enabled to exclude unsuitable paradigms from consideration for application in this study. As such, the ontological assumptions of realism, critical realism and historical realism advocated by positivism, postpositivism and critical/transformational paradigms respectively (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) were found to be unfitting to the nature of the conceptual and theoretical foundations of this study. The absence of a particular system of reality and worldview in pragmatism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was considered less capable to underpin the centrality of social constructions and interpretation needed in this study. The epistemological assumptions of positivism and postpositivism that view an investigator and object of inquiry as independent entities, such that the investigator is perceived to be objective throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) fails to accommodate the anticipated role of the researcher and the interaction with the respondents and research problem at hand. The study recognised convergence with critical/transformational paradigm over the transactional and subjectivist epistemological stance (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), but identified the underlying overall political and social change agenda of the paradigm to be beyond the scope and purpose of this study. Additionally, the researcher noted significant mismatches between the methodological needs of this study and the experimental and manipulative approaches of positivism and postpositivism, the dialectic and dialogic assumptions of the critical/transformational paradigm and the unrestricted methodological pluralism and the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods that drive pragmatism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Such processes of elimination identified the interpretivist paradigm as relatively more suitable and advantageous to the needs of this study⁷⁸. The selection of the

⁷⁸ Interpretive paradigm is also referred to as constructivism or constructivist (Davies & Fisher, 2018; Flick, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and, in some cases, as combined with constructivist world view (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The literature, at times, also uses the term 'constructivist-interpretivist' (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The interpretive framework posits that realities are socially constructed through actors and their interactions, and the meanings attached to them can be uncovered and interpreted.

interpretive paradigm is justified by three key rationale. First, the interpretive paradigm guides research that aims to explore, describe and understand phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Davies & Fisher, 2018). It produces complex, reflective and interconnected analysis, which, together, represent the key patterns observed in the broader image (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Second, the interpretive paradigm is considered to fit the nature of the two research questions that this study sets out to answer. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the extent to which the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia trusts higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education and analyse the implications this may have for the nature of quality management models implemented. Answering these questions requires exploring, describing and understanding the trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions based on the dimensions of concern, capacity, openness and risk. It also requires identifying and analysing what implications the extent of trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions may have for the nature of quality management models through the insights from the perspectives on trust building, Gamson's theory on power and trust and the quality management models. Third, the interpretive paradigm was believed to help in addressing the important conceptual concerns of the study. The core concepts of this research—trust and quality—as discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Five, and some sections in Chapter Four, are elusive, multidimensional and contested, and their understanding and conceptualisation lacks consensus. For instance, the literature on quality in higher education iterates the diversity of views on the meaning of the concept, such that different stakeholders attach dissimilar meanings to it. Hence, understanding and interpreting the views that each stakeholder included in this study, such as the quality assurance agency, public and private higher education institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders involved in quality assurance processes and the selected researchers has on the issue of trust and quality management was found to be essential. The interpretive paradigm was considered to be better suited to serving this need. Its ontological assumption of multiple realities was believed to allow capturing the respondents' views on contested issues such as trust and quality, that are open to multiple interpretations.

Ontologically, an interpretive paradigm assumes the presence of multiple subjective realities and worldviews as constructed by individuals, as opposed to the notion of singular and objective reality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Davies & Fisher, 2018; Flick, 2009). It assumes that knowledge is constructed through the process of social interchange, such that the concepts and knowledge through which we

understand the world are seen to be social artefacts that are produced and constructed through culturally and socially specific interchanges among individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Flick, 2009). The interpretivist paradigm, hence, aims to interpret and understand how individuals perceive and make sense of social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Realities are intangible mental constructions that are contextually, socially, experientially and locally specific in nature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The paradigm relies on ontological relativism that considers reality to be subjective and multiple, such that it differs from individual to individual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Flick, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study recognises that the extent to which the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia trusts higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance and its impacts on the nature of quality management models may be perceived differently by the quality assurance agency, each higher education institution, and other important stakeholders and researchers involved in the quality assurance of Ethiopian higher education. The perceptions, knowledge and experience of each group of the respondents is, thus, a key input that shape the contents of the data analysis and the interpretation of the findings.

Epistemologically, the interpretive paradigm recognises that researchers, rather than being detached and impartial, are entwined with the research process, engaged in interaction and dialogue with the research subjects and the process of knowledge production (Davies & Fisher, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The interpretive paradigm functions with a transactional and subjectivist epistemological assumption (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It sees research as an interactive process that is shaped by such as gender, biography, social class, ethnicity, race and other circumstances of the researcher and the people involved in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research questions guiding this study are answered and new insights about trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and the implications this may have for the nature of quality management models are generated through the interaction and dialogue between the researcher and the respondents from the quality assurance agency, selected higher education institutions, key researchers and experts and other groups of stakeholders included in the study. However, this epistemological stance of the interpretive paradigm is criticised for its inability to prevent the personal values and biases of the researchers from influencing the aspects of the data analysis and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Flick, 2009). Through the research processes, the researcher records, interprets and constructs narratives. The research findings are created through the interactions between the inquirer and the phenomenon under investigation, which

allows the possibilities for the inquirer to influence the phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Due to the influences of such personal characteristics, the researchers employing similar methods can be expected to arrive at subtle differences in the interpretations of their results, which can make each interpretation rather unique (Denzin, 1978). As such, the interpretive paradigm challenges the notion of an entirely value-free and objective investigation.

An interpretive paradigm employs an inductive reasoning through which general patterns and theories, rather than tested, are developed from the analysis of specific observations (Davies & Fisher, 2018). However, the research findings guided by an interpretive paradigm are often criticised for their limited generalisability and transferability (Davies & Fisher, 2018). The results from the analysis conducted on a given sample may have limited transferability to the wider population of research subjects.

Paradigms also inform the choice of research methods. Accordingly, this study employs qualitative research method, which is perceived to be consistent with an interpretive paradigm (Davies & Fisher, 2018). Qualitative research, however, may be supported with multiple theoretical underpinnings other than the interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Others also argue that qualitative, including quantitative research, can be appropriately guided by any research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Meanwhile, the researchers guided by an interpretive paradigm often rely on interviews, focus group discussion and observation as the relevant data collection instruments. Accordingly, this study collects its data from interviews, focus group discussions and documents. In general, as discussed above, the interpretive paradigm is considered to be epistemologically, ontologically and methodologically relevant to the context of this study.

7.2 Research design

Research designs serve to connect research paradigm with strategies and purposes of an inquiry and methods of collecting and analysing empirical data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A research design supports a researcher in identifying what type of information is needed to answer guiding research questions and which strategies could be effective in obtaining such information. Through research design, a researcher accesses the empirical world and interacts with specific respondents, groups, institutions, and a broader body of empirical materials such as documents and interview and other forms of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In the sections

below, the study describes its research strategy which encompasses a discussion of its qualitative research design, case study method and inductive reasoning.

7.2.1 Qualitative design

The study employs a qualitative research design. The qualitative design is considered to be particularly appropriate for studying phenomena, processes and aspects of social life in detail that require carefully understanding abstract concepts, identifying themes and analysing interrelationships between them using rich textual explanation and interpretation (Babbie, 2014; Neuman, 2014; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008; Walliman, 2011). Qualitative method is favoured in studies that seek to explore and understand a given phenomenon exhaustively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). Flick (2009) indicates that some of the common characteristics of the qualitative research include the objective to understand phenomena, the data analysis and interpretation conducted through references to cases, the assumption of reality as socially constructed and the use of texts as empirical material. Qualitative research mainly relies on text and audio-visual data gathered through interview, document review and observation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative inquiry was considered to be relevant to this study, since exploring the trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions in Ethiopia, and analysing the implications it has for the nature of the quality management model requires relying on the views of respondents, asking broad questions, collecting verbal and textual data from respondents, analysing empirical data based on thematic approach and interpreting the findings through the lenses of the theoretical and analytical framework. The nature of the research questions, type of data that need to be collected to conduct the inquiry and answer these questions, the reliance on interviews, focus group discussions and document review as key data collection instruments and the intended data analysis techniques justify the selection of qualitative study design. Consistent with the nature of qualitative research, the present study conducts its inquiry on a relatively moderate sample size composed of selected case higher education institutions, respondents from the quality assurance agency, other relevant stakeholders involved in the quality assurance of higher education and selected researchers. One of the common features of qualitative research can be the use of texts as an empirical material, since texts fulfil three main purposes, such as serving as the basis for generating findings, conducting interpretations and medium for communicating and presenting research findings

(Flick, 2009, p. 75). This study transforms the audio recordings of the interviews and focus group discussions into transcripts, gathers useful information and excerpts from relevant documents and conducts analysis and interpretations based on this textual data. Hence, text serves both as the result of the data collection and instrument of analysis and interpretation (Flick, 2009). A research problem that entails detailed understanding, relies on textual and non-quantitative data and works with a relatively smaller number of cases can be more appropriately addressed through a qualitative study (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

Although studies into trust in disciplines outside higher education have considerably employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, the literature review presented in Chapter Four, section 4.7, indicates the presence of a well-established practice of engaging trust through a qualitative analysis in the majority of higher education research. This study intends to capitalise on such experience and pedigree. Moreover, the conceptual complexity and elusiveness of trust and quality further rationalise the selection of qualitative design in this study. It suggests that a deeper understanding and exploration of trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions and its implications for the nature of quality management models necessitates a qualitative inquiry. Aside from issues related to the lack of conceptual clarity, a direct and precise measurement of trust through quantitative approaches can be elusive, since measuring the dimensions of trust, the extent to which norms are internalised and the compliance to regulations and the standards of behaviour can be challenging and costly (Zucker, 1986). It is argued that the use of indicators can, at best, provide an indirect measure and proxy of trust with a limited capacity for understanding and explaining in detail how the underlying issues that determine the levels of trust are perceived by actors who are involved in a relationship and how this may have implications for the nature of the corresponding trust building mechanisms that the actors would be driven to employ. Additionally, the interdisciplinary nature of both qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) and higher education research (Davis et al., 2010; Lincoln & Klemenčič, 2013; Macfarlane & Grant, 2012; Teichler, 2005) shows the two have inherently compatible features.

In contrast to quantitative approaches, qualitative research is more suited to preserving the rich contextual information, providing meanings and purposes that human actors attach to their activities and behaviour, uncovering emic (insider) views of studied actors, groups and societies, avoiding ambiguities related to applicability of generalisations to individual cases and balancing empirical

verification and falsification with the insights from the creative, divergent and discovery dimensions in inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 19).

As indicated in the literature, the application of a guiding theory or research paradigm, epistemology and methodology constitute the main interconnected aspects of a qualitative research process that the application of which may be influenced by the specific characteristics, background and perspectives of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this study, the collection, analysis, presentation and interpretation of the empirical data is guided by the interpretive research paradigm, the epistemology of instructiveness between the researcher and the subject under investigation and the selected research methodology.

In general, the capacity for allowing an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and the flexibility in undertaking research processes can be seen as the advantages of qualitative research, whereas the disadvantages include its inability to provide statistical description and analysis of subjects under investigation, the limited capacity for measuring and predicting phenomena with precision, time consuming in nature, the lack of suitability for studying large sample size and the questionable generalisability of the findings (Armstrong, 2010; Babbie, 2014). Moreover, Denzin and Lincoln (2018, pp. 50-53) identify two underlying tensions within qualitative research. First, qualitative research embraces the tensions arising from the tendencies to be simultaneously drawn to broader interpretations and more narrow analysis. Second, qualitative research bears tension between maintaining an objective and precise observation, on one hand, and, on the other, the need for uncovering the subjective meanings that the respondents attach to the observed phenomena that are blended with contextually situated interpretation and personal perspectives of the researcher.

7.2.2 Multiple case study

Case study research belongs to the approaches employed in qualitative research⁷⁹. Case study is considered to be a commonly applied research design in qualitative research that are guided by the interpretive or constructionist paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The literature indicates different views on case study, where some choose to consider it a methodological design (Creswell &

⁷⁹ Examples of other notable qualitative approaches include narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, and ethnography research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2014), while others see case study more in terms of a choice of what to study (Stake, 2000, 2003).

A case study research design aims to develop a full and detailed understanding of a specific case or cases through an intensive analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). The primary objective and strength of the case study design rests on its capacity for generating an in-depth, extensive and detailed exploration, examination and understanding of a specific phenomenon or entity at hand (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). It serves to generate empirical evidence that is useful in developing unique and contextually rich insights. Case study is more suited to studying contemporary issues than historical phenomenon (Yin, 2003, 2014, 2018). Case study design is considered to fit the context and needs of this research, since the design is relatively more suited than other methods to the exploration of a research problem or an issue at hand through an in-depth understanding of selected cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Other methods often used in qualitative research such as ethnography, phenomenology, narrative and grounded theory were considered to be less suitable to the nature of this study. The researcher recognises the relative suitability of phenomenology for understanding the essence of a given experience through describing the essence of lived experience; narrative design for exploring the life of an individual through telling and interpreting the told, lived and written personal stories and experiences; ethnography's reliance on an extended observation that requires the participation and continuous presence of the researcher in the research context; and the emphasis of grounded theory on theory development based on evidence from deeper inductive analysis of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such features are, however, deemed to have limited value and applicability in this inquiry. The researcher further assessed the incompatibility of common quantitative designs such as survey due to its established application for gathering quantifiable data rather than detailed qualitative insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The emphasis of the experimental design on examining causal relationships between variables and its suitability to quantitative analysis and interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) was considered to be beyond the scope of this inquiry. Such evaluation of available methods enabled to eliminate the above less applicable methods and identify the case study as a relatively better suited design to the needs and purpose of the present study.

In qualitative research, case study has developed in distinct paths: a dedication to providing an in-depth interpretation founded on the ontology of reality as socially constructed and, on the other, an emphasis on causal explanations and

generalisations beyond a given case that is guided by an objectivist ontology (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). The approach adopted in this study is consistent with the interpretative orientation of case study. Moreover, case study can serve exploratory, descriptive or explanatory purposes (Yin, 2003).

The understanding and application of case study and what constitutes a case may vary across disciplines and contexts of study (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). A case can be made up of a variety of elements, such as individuals, groups, organisations, communities, social entities or a given object, programme, incident, process and phenomena of interest (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Schwandt & Gates, 2018). In the context of this study, organisations, such as the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions constitute the primary cases for the empirical investigation. Moreover, various governmental and non-governmental stakeholder organisations provide additional information that enrich and further support the analysis conducted on the selected case organisations.

Cases are bounded in context, time and specific issue or theme of investigation at hand. Cases are studied in their natural setting over a specific period (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2003). As such, case study must have a boundary or scope, specific unit of analysis and connection between the research problem under investigation and to features of the case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). In this study, the theme that is at the centre of the empirical cases analysis is the trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions in Ethiopia with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education and the nature of the corresponding quality management models employed. Themes that fall outside of this scope are not covered in this study.

The approach followed in this study seems to be partially consistent with the two notions of case study discussed by Stake (2000, 2003)⁸⁰. First, this study shares characteristics of an ‘instrumental’ case study wherein cases are studied to better understand, explore and investigate a given problem or phenomena of interest, rather than for an ‘intrinsic’ interest in the respective cases that are perceived to be unique or unusual. Second, this study can be considered as a ‘collective case study’ since it studies multiple cases for the purpose of investigating a general issue or phenomena. The in-depth examination of the selected cases in this study is utilised to illustrate the empirical exploration and analysis of the trust relations between the

⁸⁰ Stake (2000) distinguishes between three types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental and collective case study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) also discuss the same categorisation of case studies. Intrinsic case study focuses on the case, whereas instrumental case study places emphasis on the issue or problem of interest.

quality assurance agency and higher education institutions and the implications for the quality management models in Ethiopian higher education.

The rationale behind selecting the approach of a ‘collective case study’⁸¹ is three-fold. First, examining multiple cases enables to explore and uncover diverse perspectives of an issue (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 2006). Second, multiple case supports the replication of procedures (Yin, 2003) and evidence and findings within and across the cases. Third, working with multiple cases allows the empirical analysis to be conducted on a sample that more closely represents the characteristics and nuances of a study population (Gerring, 2007) and, hence, can improve the generalisability of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The literature suggests that conducting empirical analysis on multiple cases that provide diverse perspectives on the problem at hand is considered to be preferable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, investigating multiple cases can be resource consuming and complex (Stake, 2006) and the depth of the empirical analysis may decrease as the number of cases employed in a study increases (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gerring, 2007). As such, the use of multiple data types and sources of data determines the depth and the quality of analysis in a case study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2003). In most cases, case studies rely on a combination of observation, interview, document analysis and other sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Moreover, the literature shows that case study design often encounters concerns in relation to its degree of relevance to theory development, validity and reliability issues (Flyvbjerg, 2006, 2011). However, the lessons and insights gathered from a case study can assist in making assertions, identifying patterns and providing explanations (Stake, 2000, 2003; Yin, 2003).

7.2.3 Inductive reasoning

This study employs an inductive logical reasoning. In inductive reasoning, researchers start with particular observations and instances and seek to construct general principles (Babbie, 2014). The reasoning proceeds from facts and observed data to empirical generalisations, rules and laws and theory (Babbie, 2014; Reichertz, 2014). Such an approach plays a key role in theory construction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Moreover, an inductive approach is considered to be consistent with the nature of qualitative research.

⁸¹ Other terms used in the literature include multiple case study and comparative case method (Yin, 2018).

Deductive and abductive reasoning were evaluated to be less suitable to the nature of this study. It is argued that the applicability of deductive reasoning in this study is remote, since the inquiry at hand is not concerned with verifying and confirming theories through testing hypothesis in a top-down orientation of data analysis (Creswell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Similarly, the assessment of the nature of abductive reasoning indicates its limited compatibility and utility to this study, since the present investigation is not directed at constructing and comparing theoretical explanations or provisional hypothesis to explain particular ‘puzzling findings’ or empirical cases (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 721). Further, abductive reasoning seems to be far from the scope of this study, since the inquiry does not proceed from puzzling, surprising or incomplete observations to deriving the likeliest explanations (Haig, 2008; Reichertz, 2014)⁸², or position itself to answer its research questions by proceeding from one particular evidence to another and arriving at one or more plausible and coherent explanations (Krippendorff, 2010). This implies the limited relevance of the type of reasoning and inference that underpins abduction.

In contrast, the researcher selected induction as more fitting to the intended approach of this inquiry. As such, induction is argued to possess better capacity to support the present study, such as in deriving patterns, themes and generalised insights from observation of selected cases; using a theoretical and analytical framework as a lens that informs the investigation into the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), complementing the application of the interpretivism as a guiding paradigm that follows an inductive understanding and interpretation of the subjective meanings that the respondents attach to the research problem under investigation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and ensuring the compatibility with the essence of a qualitative design that employs case studies and thematic analysis.

The study analyses the empirical data gathered through interviews, focus group discussions and document review in detail to identify broader patterns and generalised insights about the trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions in Ethiopia and the implications this may have for the nature of quality management models. This is expected to generate useful insights into the trust between stakeholders in quality assurance processes in higher education systems and how this may be linked to the driving purpose and nature of the quality management models that are put in place. The empirical and theoretical insights generated through the data analysis and interpretation are used to incrementally

⁸² Reichertz, (2014, p. 126) argues that abductive inquiry is initiated by surprise, anxiety and doubt arising from observations and facts without presuppositions and particular theory.

develop broader patterns and generalisations about the status of the trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions in Ethiopia, how the extent of such trust can be explored, how various levels of trust may be linked to the nature and driving purpose of different quality management models, and how quality assurance agencies may employ mechanisms to build trust. The results of the study may implicate broader cultural and structural issues within Ethiopian higher education system. However, the study concedes that generalisations arrived through inductive reasoning may face the problem of uncertainties. The applicability and transferability of the inductive generalisations that are drawn based on qualitative studies with smaller cases often can be restricted. Qualitative induction is criticised as being tenuous and ‘a probable form of inference’, since it fails to convey a valid and truthful account of all the possible contexts that are not covered in the analysis beyond hoping that the generalisations driven based on the limited observations also hold true in other contexts (Reichertz, 2014, p. 129). The study, hence, intends to make a contextually bound generalisation.

The study attempts to increase the credibility and applicability of its generalisations, among other things, by selecting a sample that more closely represent the nuances within Ethiopian higher education system, carefully analysing an extensive empirical data and accommodating the views of various key stakeholders involved in the quality assurance processes. The sample used in this study balances public and private higher education institutions, consists of higher education institutions that are found at all stages of development and function at all available institutional status that are legally applicable to higher education institutions, includes a moderate and sufficient number of case higher education institutions, and comprises a comprehensive variety of important governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the quality assurance of higher education in Ethiopia.

7.3 Sampling

In this section, the study describes the procedures it employed for selecting the case institutions and respondents, provides a brief overview of the case institutions and presents the components of the sample used for conducting the inquiry.

7.3.1 Procedures for selecting the case institutions and respondents

Sampling constitutes an integral component of a scientific research process in which researchers study in detail a representative subsection of a wider population for the purpose of making inferences and generalisations about the whole population (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). The representativeness of a sample determines the extent to which the generalisations and inferences drawn from its analysis apply for the components of the whole population (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

The method employed to select case institutions includes a combination of two non-probability sampling types: purposive sampling and referral/snowball sampling. Purposive sampling enables researchers to select specific cases of interest that can serve to illustrate a phenomenon under investigation (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008)⁸³. In purposive sampling, cases and respondents are selected into a study sample on the basis of the researcher's judgement of their usefulness and representativeness (Babbie, 2014). Such an approach can be considered as an 'information-oriented selection' where researchers intentionally select cases on the basis of the specific expectations about the information and insights they may offer (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). Creswell and Poth (2018) note the value of such sampling strategy for selecting cases and determining the relevance of the information within each case. The use of purposive sampling to select relevant cases that are believed to contain rich information, tailor to the characteristics of a study population, fit the specific needs and purpose of a given research context is common in qualitative case studies (Babbie, 2014; Creswell, 2012; Stake, 2006). In this study, the characteristics of higher education institutions, such as their legal status, their perceived status of the overall institutional capacity, their areas of specialisations, their geographic location and their perceived reputations regarding their performance in quality assurance (at least in the case of one private university, i.e. Admas University) constitute the key considerations in identifying the relevant cases for the empirical analysis.

The rationale that guided the selection of the case higher education institutions, stakeholder organisations and the respondents into the study sample is discussed below:

The identification and selection of relevant cases can be challenging in multiple case studies such as the present study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 2006). This is partly due to the lack of a commonly applied principle for deciding the optimal

⁸³ Purposive sampling is also referred to as purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018) or judgemental sampling (Babbie, 2014).

number of cases for a multiple case study. Some recommend four to five cases (e.g. Creswell & Creswell, 2018), while others suggest that multiple cases can be more beneficial if the number of cases studied is either less than four or more than 15 (Stake, 2006). This creates a challenge in deciding how many cases to utilise for an empirical analysis. In this study, the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance, and the implications this may have for the nature of the quality management models is investigated through the interaction between the quality assurance agency and six selected case higher education institutions. The main rationale behind such an approach was to conduct an empirical analysis on a comprehensive sample that comprises different types of higher education institutions and represents all the characteristics of higher education institutions that are currently found in Ethiopian higher education. Drawing on such rationale, the study mostly selected cases that were accessible to the researcher and were deemed to represent a specific category of higher education institutions. However, the study did not include more higher education institutions in its sample in order to keep its inquiry manageable and avoid compromising the depth of its analysis. The literature also suggests that qualitative studies often conduct inquiry on few carefully selected cases, since this is convenient to analyse cases extensively (Creswell, 2012).

Higher education institutions with various size, stages of seniority, overall institutional capacity and legal/operational status were selected from both the public and private sectors in order to work with a comprehensive and representative sample. Accordingly, a representative university was selected from each category of first, second and third generation public universities. Similarly, from over 245 private higher education institutions operating in the country with different operational status, the researcher selected three institutions representing the status of a college, university college and university. Three interrelated rationale support such an approach:

- 1) Such a comprehensive composition of case institutions was aimed at working with a sample that more closely represent the nuances within the current Ethiopian higher education system⁸⁴. A review of the literature suggests that such an approach

⁸⁴ Although the higher education proclamation (650/2009) specifies the status of higher education institutions as university, university college, college and institute (FDRE, 2009, Art. 9), the quality assurance agency (HERQA) does not conduct accreditation and audit for those entities operating with the status of an institute. External quality evaluations until now have only been applied for universities, university colleges and colleges. For this reason, this study excludes institutes from its study sample. Institutes are the only type of higher education institution found in the research site that are not

is largely missing from the majority of previous studies that were conducted in the context of Ethiopian higher education. An exception to this is the study by Kahsay (2012, p. 94) that applied similar reasoning in selecting three public universities, where each case was intended to represent a category of ‘new and small’, ‘medium and young’, and ‘large and old’ universities. However, a similar consideration of size, seniority and overall institutional status was not employed by Kahsay (2012) to select the cases from private higher educations. This gap in previous studies makes the approaches followed in the present study unique. Meanwhile, previous studies found that the overall institutional capacity plays key role in the development and effectiveness of quality assurance at higher education institutions (Abebe, 2014; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kahsay, 2012). The literature on trust reiterates that the perceived capacity, competence and ability of a trustee influences the trustor’s propensity to trust (Butler, 1991; Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Gabarro, 1987; Hardin, 2002; Leimeister et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 1998; Migliore & DeClouette, 2011; Mishra, 1996; Ruokonen, 2018; Swan et al., 1988; Tyler, 2003). Moreover, Stake (2006, p. 23) proposes three key criteria that can serve as a general rule for selecting cases in a multiple case study: a consideration of the relevance of the cases to the problem under investigation, whether the cases provide diverse insights across contexts and whether they offer useful opportunities for better understanding the complexity and contexts of the issue at hand. In a multiple case study, it is important to select cases that incorporate diversity of contexts, since one of the main purposes of a multiple case study is to examine how a given phenomenon or problem perform in different contexts and environments (Stake, 2006). Such purposive sampling of cases takes into account the characteristics and parameters of the research population (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Stake, 2006). The selection of cases in this study is consistent with a consideration of the above three criteria.

2) Such a comprehensive, diverse and representative sample was expected to enable to examine and capture possible differences, if any, within the level of the trust that the quality assurance agency places across all types of higher education institutions in the country and its implications for the nature of the quality management model implemented.

3) It is argued that using six case higher education institutions, while maintaining a feasible scope, can help provide more evidence to better understand the overall

included in this study. In fact, no known local study concerning higher education has ever covered institutes. Nevertheless, most institutes function as sub-units of public universities and their status in higher education research in Ethiopia has been insignificant.

nature of the trust relations and its implications for nature of quality management models.

Such a strategy of purposively selecting the aforementioned cases could be seen as ‘maximal variation sampling’ (Creswell, 2012, p. 207) or ‘maximum variation cases’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230) that enables capturing diverse perspectives and obtaining information that could shed light on the complexity and various circumstances of the phenomenon. The table below presents the selected case higher education institutions.

Table 4. Selected case higher education institutions

	Category of higher education institutions	
	Public	Private
Institutional diversity across: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size • Seniority • Levels of overall institutional capacity • Legal status 	Mekelle University <i>First generation university</i>	Admas University <i>University</i>
	Wollo University <i>Second generation university</i>	Sheba University College <i>University College</i>
	Woldia University <i>Third generation university</i>	Medco Bio-Medical College <i>College</i>

The rationale behind selecting Admas University was two-fold: a) it was selected to represent private higher education institutions that operate with a university status, and b) more importantly, Admas University has built a strong reputation, unlike the majority of private higher education institutions, for its commitment to quality and quality assurance in the eyes of the quality assurance agency, the community of private higher education institutions and including public universities in Ethiopia. The latter rationale implied the presence of an uncommon case and atypical private institution that can potentially provide unique insights into the trust relations between the quality assurance agency and private higher education institutions. Such an approach of selecting ‘extreme/deviant cases’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230) or ‘extreme case sampling’ (Creswell, 2012, p. 208) can enable researchers in obtaining useful information and unusual insights from cases. The researcher learnt that the implementation of quality assurance at Admas University has come to be increasingly seen by the quality assurance agency as a good example. Interestingly, the quality assurance activities of the university have been benchmarked over the past years by several private higher education institutions and, particularly interesting, including public universities. These distinguished characteristics and the noticeable success in quality assurance were considered to useful for enriching the present study. The study, hence, considered the potential for learning key lessons from Admas

University. The literature on case study research methods suggests that special insights and useful lessons can be gained from studying atypical cases (Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008; Stake, 2000, 2006). The selection of such deviant cases can be considered another example of purposive sampling.

The study ensured the equal representation of public and private higher education institutions in its sample in order to give equal emphasis to both types of higher education institutions and avoid the prevalent marginalisation of private institutions from higher education research in Ethiopia, at least as exhibited in the majority of previous studies⁸⁵. However, the study recognises that private higher education institutions account for only about 14 per cent of total enrolment in higher education, whereas the share of public institutions stands at 86 per cent.

Cases are selected from both public and private higher education institutions partly to capture the differential treatment and the underlying dissimilar trust relations that the quality agency is perceived, claimed and implied to have, at least in some previous studies, with the two sectors (e.g. Adamu & Addamu, 2012; Geda, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Woldetinsae, 2009). This is served by taking case institutions from both sectors⁸⁶. Accordingly, the selection of equal number of public and private higher education institutions has a theoretical significance, since this is expected to uncover possible differences in the trust relations that the quality assurance agency has with institutions from the two sectors and the differences in the nature of the quality management models that these sectors are subjected to. Such an approach of selecting samples based on a consideration of the relevance of the cases to a given theoretical and analytical model can be regarded as ‘theoretical sampling’ (Babbie, 2014; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

The selection of the case institutions also took in account their geographical dispersion across the country. This is consistent with the notion of a ‘multisite’ case study discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018), since the selected case higher education institutions are located in different geographical areas, rather than at a single location. Accordingly, while two case higher education institutions are located in the capital city, where the national quality agency is based, the other four institutions operate out of the capital. This was done in order to address the geographical concerns identified in the international review of the role and functions of the national quality agency that was conducted in 2016. The report found issues related to the

⁸⁵ More information about this issue can be found in Chapter One, section 1.2.1.

⁸⁶ The public-private dichotomy in quality assurance requirements is discussed in detail in Chapter Eight, section 8.5.1 and Chapter Nine, section 9.1.3.

operational efficiency and the ability of the agency to successfully address the needs and problems of higher education institutions that operate outside the capital and are located in remote and less accessible areas (Henson et al., 2016). Additionally, the selected stakeholders in the quality assurance of the Ethiopian higher education that are included in this study also are based in the capital city.

When conducting interviews at public universities with the quality assurance coordinators at the college and faculty levels, the researcher made an effort to take into account disciplinary diversity. Accordingly, the study was able to capture internal quality assurance activities from the perspective of various disciplinary categories, such as the Faculty of Social Sciences and Linguistics at Mekelle University, College of Medicine and Health Sciences at Wollo University and Faculty of Technology at Woldia University. The same could not be applied at the selected private higher education institutions as the organisation of their internal quality assurance structures were more centralised rather than cascaded to the college and faculty or department levels. Meanwhile, the researcher considered the comprehensive nature of the programmes provided at Admas University and Sheba University College and the specialisation of Medco Bio-Medical College in health sciences.

The study excluded certain higher education institutions from its sample based on relevant justifications. The 11 new public universities established in 2016, which are considered as ‘fourth generation’ public universities, were not included in the study for two reasons: these institutions have not yet become fully functional, since major construction works are still ongoing, and those that have admitted students and started delivering programmes are yet to meaningfully implement internal quality assurance procedures and undergo external quality evaluation by the quality assurance agency. The combination of these two factors suggest the absence of significant quality assurance activities to warrant a consideration for inclusion in the study. In general, both public and private higher education institutions who are yet to engage in accreditation and quality audit processes with the quality assurance agency are excluded from the consideration for sampling. Moreover, although Article 9 of the higher education proclamation (650/2009) considers entities established with status of an ‘institute’ as belonging to the class of higher education institutions, this study did not include such entities in its sample.

Higher education institutions in conflict prone regions of Ethiopia, mainly in the Oromia regional state, could not be included in the sample in order to avoid the risks to the safety of the researcher. The situation has continued to intensify over the past few years and has shown less signs of deescalating, particularly since protests and

violence within campus premises began to soar in 2015⁸⁷. The conflict and violence has resulted in loss of life, injuries, abduction of students, destruction of university facilities and repeated interruptions in the teaching-learning processes (Aberra, 2019; Ashenafi, 2020; Aderaw, 2020a; Gebremariam, 2019; “Government Should Break its Silence About Abducted Students,” 2020; “Government Should Provide Information About Abducted Students,” 2020; HERQA, 2018e; Hussien, 2020a; Tenagne, 2017; Tsege, 2019b, 2020; Yared, 2019; Yibeltal, 2019). Thousands of students have fled campuses and many either dropped out or enrolled in higher education institutions located in relatively stable areas. Such a volatile situation was believed to be unsuitable for a successful field work and data collection.

The selection of participants for the focus group discussions at the quality assurance agency was aimed at capturing the perspectives of the two main internal structures of the agency for external quality evaluation: accreditation and quality audit strands⁸⁸. Accordingly, the researcher held two focus group discussions with the teams of experts from each strand. Such an approach was deemed important, since the homogeneity of participants is desired in focus groups (Hennink, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The main criteria used in recruiting participants to the group interview sessions were the strands of external quality evaluation in which they have worked and whether they had on-site experiences of conducting accreditations and audits in higher education institutions. Furthermore, the literature recommends researchers to conduct more than one focus group to increase the dependability and generalisability of insights gained from the discussion (Babbie, 2014).

The inclusion of selected governmental and non-governmental stakeholder organisations in the empirical investigation is justified by four interrelated rationales. First, capturing the perspectives of important governmental and non-governmental stakeholders was believed to be crucial for this study, since these organisations have significant interest and role in quality assurance processes mainly at national level and, to a limited extent, at institutional level. Second, the extent of the stakeholder engagement in quality assurance processes is expected to provide more insights into the status of the trust relations and the nature of quality management models being

⁸⁷ The issue of ethnically charged political conflict and instability within campuses of higher education institutions is discussed in Chapter Six, section 6.6.4.

⁸⁸ Despite such differentiated internal structures, the researcher learned on-site that all experts from both the accreditation and audit strands were working together exclusively on accreditation evaluations, since the agency had already discontinued all quality audit evaluations since 2017. The approach of conducting separate focus group discussions was initially thought to enable to understand and capture possible differences, if any, between the perceptions and experiences of both groups of experts. The analysis of data, however, found no marked differences.

implemented in Ethiopia. Third, the information gathered from the selected stakeholders is believed to enrich the depth and quality of the analysis and interpretation of the data. Fourth, the interviews conducted with the respondents from these selected stakeholders serve to triangulate the data gathered from other sources.

Selected researchers and experts were included in this study for three main purposes. First, to gain expert insights that could assist in explaining and interpreting the key findings of the study regarding why the status of the trust and the nature of quality management models are the way they are. Second, to check how the preliminary findings of the study compare to previous studies and the theoretical and empirical evidence on the subject. Third, to gather more evidence for the purpose of triangulating the data collected from other sources. In terms of chronological order, the interviews with the selected experts and researchers were conducted at the end of the field work, which was after the data was collected from the case higher education institutions, quality assurance agency and key governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, and the preliminary patterns were beginning to emerge.

Within the selected case higher education institutions, the majority of individual respondents were selected through a purposive sampling method. The researcher purposely selected those respondents who fit the objective of the study and were believed to have better familiarity with and involvement in the management of quality assurance, and those who actively participate in the liaison and vertical communication with the quality assurance agency. The selection of the individual respondents gave priority to those who are directly involved in designing, implementing and coordinating quality assurance activities and those who work at senior management positions in higher education institutions. In some instances, particularly in the case of the stakeholder organisations included in the study, the staff members with rich practical experience and technical knowledge on quality management were selected instead of those in more administrative roles. While conducting the focus group discussions at the quality assurance agency, the researcher sought to include as much staff as possible in order to enrich the diversity of views and the weight of evidence.

In addition to purposive sampling, the study relied on snowball or referral sampling. In such sampling method, researchers request their respondents to suggest additional respondents who are difficult to locate or about whom researchers may lack information (Babbie, 2014; Creswell, 2012). The researcher collects data from located respondents and then requests them to provide information needed to identify and locate other important subjects whom they may know (Babbie, 2014).

This sampling technique was useful in identifying key respondents. For example, seven respondents were selected through referrals made by respondents who were initially selected purposively. The referrals were particularly important in identifying relevant stakeholder organisations involved in the process of higher education quality assurance and the experts whose work the researcher had little or no information about. In these cases, the respondents whom the researcher have interviewed offered recommendations to contact other potential subjects and, in most cases, also provided their contact information. In one instance, the researcher requested assistance from a respondent to help identify an individual who has served in the board of the quality assurance agency and has the experience of working in senior management position in a higher education institution. In another occasion, the researcher asked a respondent to identify a relevant person to interview from the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association. Additionally, upon the recommendation received during a doctoral research seminar at Tampere University, the researcher interviewed an expert who served in the international panel commissioned by the World Bank to review the performance of Ethiopian public universities in science and technology. The scope of this review encompassed investigation, though not exhaustive enough, into the status of external and internal quality assurance practices.

7.3.2 Brief overview of the case institutions

Mekelle University

Mekelle University is a first-generation public university located in the town of Mekelle, in Tigray region, about 780 km North of Addis Ababa. It was established in 2000 with the Council of Ministers regulation number 61/1999 through the merger of two former colleges, namely Mekelle Business College and Mekelle University College. Mekelle Business College was established as a School of Economics in 1987 to train middle-level experts who could carry out various administrative activities, and later was upgraded to college status and relocated to become the first higher education institution in the region. On the other hand, Mekelle University College has its origin as a college specialising in agriculture and natural resources management. Later it established faculty for science and technology and law. The two colleges which formed Mekelle University have their own historical development and have been relocated several times.

Mekelle University has expanded rapidly since its establishment. The university now has 64 departments, seven colleges and 10 institutes spread across seven campuses (QAO, 2018). The quarterly statistical report of Mekelle University from 2018 shows that it has a sum of over 31,000 students in all programmes and a teaching staff of more than 2500. It provides education and training in various fields at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The programmes are delivered in regular and continuing modalities such as on evening, summer/in-service and distance basis. The recent study unveiled by the Reform Council of Higher Education at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which categorises universities according to mission and excellence, categorised Mekelle University as one of the eight research universities despite its current emphasis on providing comprehensive programmes than a tangible and prevalent engagement in research (Kassahun, 2020). Mekelle University also actively engages in several international research and development projects.

As a senior university, Mekelle University has undergone an institutional quality audit by HERQA in 2008, and at the time of the data collection in September 2018, it has also finalised an institutional self-evaluation and had submitted its request to HERQA for an external validation.

Wollo University

Wollo University is a second-generation public university located in the city of Dessie around 400 km North of Addis Ababa. The university was founded in 2005 and later officially began to operate in February of 2007. It was established through the Council of Ministers regulation number 221/2011. The university has eight colleges at Dessie campus, namely the College of Business and Economics, School of Veterinary Medicine, College of Agriculture, College of Natural Sciences, College of Medicine and Health Sciences, College of Social Science and Humanities, School of Law and Institute of Teacher Education, and Pedagogical Science. The university has two institutes at its Kombolcha campus which are located near an industrial park and manufacturing plants. This highlights the strategic location of the Kombolcha Institute of Technology. Wollo University is currently preparing to construct a third campus in the city of Kemise. The general area where Wollo University is located has rich artistic, religious, historical, trade and industrial significance. This creates an opportunity for the university to play a key role in the regional social, cultural and economic development. Currently, the university delivers 76-degree programmes.

The recent study unveiled by the Reform Council of Higher Education at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which categorises universities according

to mission and excellence, categorised Wollo University as one of the 15 applied universities (Kassahun, 2020). The university is expected to structure its growth in the path of an applied university. Moreover, Wollo University has undergone an institutional quality audit by HERQA in 2014.

Woldia University

Woldia University a third-generation public university based in the city of Woldia located 520 km North of Addis Ababa. The university was established in 2011 through the Council of Ministers regulation number 223/2011. Woldia University has two campuses, in the cities of Woldia and Mersa. The university has 8 faculties, about 34 departments and 43 programmes. The main academic units of the university are Faculty of Social Science, Faculty of Business and Economics, Faculty of Educational and Behavioural Science, and Faculty of Natural and Computational Sciences, Institute of Technology, College of Health Science, College of Agriculture and School of Land Administration. Currently, the university has a student population of over 10,000. It plans to increase its in-take capacity over the coming years.

The recent study unveiled by the Reform Council of Higher Education at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, which categorises universities according to mission and excellence, categorised Woldia University as one of the 21 general institutions (Kassahun, 2020). With respect to experience in quality assurance, Woldia University has not yet carried out a comprehensive institutional self-evaluation and undergone external evaluation by HERQA.

Admas University

Admas University is one of the earliest private higher education institutions in Ethiopia which was established in 1998 as a business training centre focusing on providing various short-term training. It later upgraded its status to a college in 1999 and later to a university college in 2007 (HERQA, 2009). Admas continued making progress in its overall institutional capacity and scope of its programmes which enabled it to be granted the status of a full-fledged university by the Ministry of Education in 2014.

Admas fulfilled the requirements specified in the higher education proclamation (650/2009) for granting a status of university. These requirements include having a

minimum enrolment capacity of 2000 students in regular undergraduate and graduate programmes in at least three academic units larger than departments, or the same number of students in regular undergraduate programmes in at least four academic units larger than departments; having a record of at least four consecutive classes of graduates in a degree programme after being accredited as a university college, college or institute; undertaking research in different fields and publishing and disseminating research findings; having a curriculum that match the national standards set by the Ministry of Education, the necessary academic staff, institutional governance structures, teaching materials, classrooms, libraries, laboratories, other appropriate discipline-related facilities; and fulfilling other minimum national standards (FDRE, 2009, Art. 11).

Admas University has several campuses in Addis Ababa and in other cities across various regions of Ethiopia, and more than 60 distance education coordination centres. By December 2018, it has more than 500 teachers and 30,000 students in all its programmes. Admas also provides Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). The university also actively engages in research, publishes various academic journals and organises research conferences and discussion seminars. The profile of Admas University shows that, from its establishment until 2018, has graduated more than 37,000 in all its programmes.

As a private higher education institution, Admas University relies on accreditation and reaccreditation permits for lawfully delivering its programmes, and thus has gone through several such external evaluations. It has also undergone an institutional quality audit in 2009 and has already conducted an institutional self-evaluation in 2017, at the time of the data collection, and was awaiting an external visit by peer reviewers from HERQA.

Sheba University College

Sheba University College is another pioneering private higher education institution established in 1999 as a Sheba Info-Tech and Business College with a focus on providing training in ICT. Sheba is based in the city of Mekelle, about 780 km North of Addis Ababa, and currently has five campuses in other cities within the Tigray regional state such as Axum, Shire, Adwa, Humera and Alamata. The institution has rapidly expanded its operations and was upgraded by the Ministry of Education to the status of a university college in 2008 after fulfilling the necessary requirements. These requirements include having a minimum enrolment capacity of 2000 undergraduate students in regular degree programmes in at least three academic units

larger than departments; having a record of at least three consecutive classes of graduates in a degree programme after being accredited as a college or institute; undertaking research in different fields and publishing and disseminating research findings; having a curriculum that match the national standards set by the Ministry of Education, the necessary academic staff, institutional governance structures, teaching materials, classrooms, libraries, laboratories, other appropriate discipline-related facilities; and fulfilling other minimum national standards (FDRE, 2009, Art. 12).

Currently, Sheba University College has four main faculties and nine departments. The faculties include Faculty of Business and Economics, Faculty of Health Science, Faculty of Informatics, Faculty of Engineering. of the programmes Most programmes Sheba delivers are at undergraduate level although it has started offering graduate programmes. Sheba University College has distance and continuing education. Additionally, at the time of the data collection, Sheba also provides Technical and Vocational Training and Education in accounting, information technology, automotive technology, general metal and fabrications, construction technology and electrical and electronics. Besides higher education, Sheba also has an academy which provides education from kindergarten to junior primary school levels to the community. However, Sheba has over the years accorded a relatively insufficient emphasis to research and community outreach activities (HERQA, 2011).

Regarding interaction with HERQA, Sheba University College has gone through several accreditation and reaccreditation permit evaluations for all the programmes it delivers and has also undergone an institutional quality audit by HERQA in 2011.

Medco Bio-Medical College

Medco Bio-Medical College is a private higher education institution was established a research and consultancy organisation in 1995 by an Ethiopian medical researcher trained in Europe. It initially was engaging in the areas of health, medicine and generally in the scientific research and development field. Medco gradually diversified its scope, in line with national socio-economic developments, to upgrade its operation and include its establishment as a bio-medical college in 2001. In doing so, Medco became the first private higher education institution to provide training in health with the goal of developing a high-quality practical education, training and other related health services. The Ministry of Education granted the status of college to Medco after it met the requirements specified in the higher education

proclamation (651/2009). These requirements include offering higher education in degree programmes at least in one academic unit larger than departments; having a curriculum that match the national standards set by the Ministry of Education, the necessary academic staff, institutional governance structures, teaching materials, classrooms, libraries, laboratories, other appropriate discipline-related facilities, and fulfilling other minimum national standards (FDRE, 2009, Art. 13). Medco also offers degree and Technical and Vocational Education and Training programmes in various fields of study both in the regular and extension modalities (HERQA, 2014a). The college is based in Addis Ababa.

Regarding interaction with HERQA, Medco Bio-Medical College has since its establishment gone through several accreditation and reaccreditation permit evaluations for all the programmes it delivers and has also undergone an institutional quality audit by HERQA in 2014. Currently, the operations of the college have weakened significantly following the closure of its degree programmes in Nursing, Health Officer and Pharmacy in 2016 due to HERQA's decision that Medco failed to meet the minimum quality standards required for receiving accreditation and reaccreditation permits (Mohammed, 2016). However, Medco used have more than 1200 students in all its programmes and more than 50 academic staff. Medco has made efforts to establish a pharmaceutical manufacturing plant. Moreover, Medco's mission seems to give limited emphasis to research and community service activities (HERQA, 2014a).

7.3.3 Components of the sample

The sample on which the study conducted its empirical data analysis consists of four main components: selected higher education institutions, quality assurance agency, selected governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected experts and researchers in the quality assurance of Ethiopian higher education. A total of 33 respondents that were selected from these groups participated in this study.

A. Higher education institutions (13 respondents): The six selected higher education institutions are Mekelle University, Wollo University, Woldia University, Admas University, Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College. The researcher interviewed the selected respondents who held positions, such as heads of internal quality assurance units, college level coordinators of quality assurance activities and senior institutional management.

B. Quality assurance agency (HERQA) (8 respondents): The study conducted focus group discussions and an interview with the following officers of the agency:

- Team of accreditation experts
- Team of quality audit experts
- The agency's legal affairs unit

C. Stakeholders (7 respondents): The study captured the perspectives of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the quality assurance processes of Ethiopian higher education. The governmental stakeholders included in this study are the Ministry of Education⁸⁹ and Education Strategy Centre (ESC). At the Ministry of Education, the researcher interviewed: (1) a former senior official who served during the period that both the public and private higher education began to rapidly massify and the quality assurance agency (HERQA) was established, and (2) an expert from the monitoring and evaluation division for private higher education. At the Education Strategy Centre, the researcher initially had an email correspondence and later a face-to-face interview with a quality evaluation and qualification framework expert. The non-governmental stakeholders consist of the international development organisations and the private organisations which have significant involvement in quality assurance processes. These include the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association, Ethiopian Quality Award Organisation (EQA), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and Jhpiego.

D. Researchers and expert (5 respondents): The study conducted interviews with selected researchers who are believed to have an extensive knowledge of the field of higher education and quality assurance in the context of Ethiopia. The selected experts and researchers include:

- Academics who have conducted their doctoral research on quality assurance and the relationship between universities and government and society in Ethiopia. These experts have also published other key studies in the area of higher education.
- An expert who served as a peer reviewer in quality audits in Ethiopia
- Experts who served and are currently serving as members in the board of the quality assurance agency

⁸⁹ It was restructured into the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MOSHE) shortly after the data collection.

- An expert who have served in an international panel that reviewed the performance of Ethiopian public universities in science and technology

Moreover, about 24 out of the 33 respondents selected into the sample have directly participated in the external quality evaluations of higher education institutions. Such practical experience was considered to be particularly relevant and useful to the inquiry of this study. For instance:

- 7 respondents have served in the panels of peer reviewers for the audit and accreditation evaluations of public and private institutions
- 6 respondents have the experience of being interviewed by peer reviewers during an external quality evaluation
- 8 respondents at the quality assurance agency have been heavily involved in accreditation and audits evaluations of higher education institutions
- 2 respondents currently sit in the board of the quality assurance agency
- 1 respondent from the Ministry of Education has been involved in the external monitoring visits of public higher education institutions

7.4 Instruments of data collection

Case study research relies on multiple data sources, such as observation, interviews and document and other forms of audio-visual data to conduct an extensive exploration of a given case or cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Accordingly, the empirical investigation of the trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions and its implications for the nature of quality management models is conducted based on the data gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document review. Besides two pilot interviews and one session of focus group discussion involving 14 respondents, a total of 26 one-on-one interviews and two focus group discussions provided the relevant first-hand information.

Primary data was collected from the respondents through semi-structured one-on-one interview and focus group discussions. The rationale for selecting these instruments rests on their capacity to enable researchers to understand and explore in-depth the views, opinion and perspectives of respondents. This is crucial for qualitative inquiries, such as this study, that are guided by an interpretivist paradigm.

In contrast to rigid questionnaires that are employed in quantitative studies, less-structured interviews are considered to be more appropriate for qualitative research

that require flexibility during field work (Babbie, 2014)⁹⁰. Other notable advantages of interviews include the capacity to obtain information on processes that may not be directly observable, allow respondents to describe their viewpoints in detail without being constrained by rigid instruments and give the researcher a degree of control to pose general questions and direct the conversation (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, interviews may have some disadvantages. For instance, the presence of a researcher may bias the respondents' behaviour and response, the respondents may provide untruthful or ambiguous information and the analysis of interview data leaves significant room for the researcher to subjectively filter data (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher used an interview guide consisting of broad and general questions for conducting the interviews and focus group discussions. The questions included in the interview guide were derived from four main sources, namely the two research questions, elements of the theoretical and analytical framework, literature review and the discussions held with the respondents. Some questions were also formulated, to certain extent, from the review of the documents gathered by the researcher prior to conducting the interviews and focus group discussions. Additionally, the specific contexts of the studied higher education institutions, particularly at Admas University and Medco Bio-Medical College, shaped the questions asked during the discussions with the respondents.

Further, three main rationale are provided for using the interview guide. First, the interview guide allows researchers to conduct interviews based on a general plan of topics to be explored with flexible and iterative approach and without the need to strictly follow specific list, order and articulation of questions (Babbie, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Researchers, with the help of the guide, establish general direction for the discussion by posing broad questions (Creswell, 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The literature indicates that open-ended questions are useful for researchers in exploring the views of respondents in detail in studies that are guided by an interpretive paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Second, the interview guide, by providing a general structure for interactions, can enable conversations between a researcher and respondent occur more naturally and smoothly (Babbie, 2014). During the process of the interviews and focus group discussions, the researcher asked general questions, attentively listened to responses, attempted to understand and interpret the meanings of respondents' viewpoints, further probed responses or formulated additional questions and directed the flow of conversation. Third,

⁹⁰ Interviews can have different types such as one-on-one interview, focus group interview, telephone interview and e-mail interview (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

interview guide facilitates note taking during the conversation and assists researchers in keeping accurate records of essential information about each interview and focus group discussion session (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The semi-structured interviews covered diverse groups of participants, such as quality assurance officers and senior management figures from the six selected public and private higher education institutions, accreditation and audit experts at the quality assurance agency (HERQA), former and current Ministry of Education officials, selected researchers in the area of quality assurance, experts who served and are currently serving as members in the board of the quality assurance agency, experts who served as peer reviewers in institutional audits, experts who served in international panels that reviewed the performance of Ethiopian public universities and other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders who are involved in supporting quality assurance efforts, such as Education Strategy Centre (ESC), Ethiopian Quality Award Organisation, Jhpiego and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). Accordingly, the use of tailored guides for the interviews and focus group enabled the researcher to pose relevant and useful questions to each group of respondents.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, the researcher convened two semi-structured focus group discussions at the quality assurance agency. The first focus group discussion was conducted with a team of five quality audit experts, whereas the second was with a team of two accreditation experts⁹¹. Although the initial plan was to conduct one-on-one interviews with the experts at the quality assurance agency, the researcher made adjustments on site on the basis of a suggestion from a senior coordinator of these experts to have a focus group discussion in order to maximise the use of time given their heavy workload and tight schedule. The literature of research methodology considers the ability to interview a group of respondents simultaneously and systematically a key advantage of focus group discussions (Babbie, 2014). Other strengths of focus group discussion include its efficiency in terms of time and resource, ability to quickly generate large amount of data, enables flexible and natural discussions within a real-life setting, engages participants in conversation and interactive exchanges, supports guided and focused discussion, enables gathering a range of perspectives, provides opportunity to validate and triangulate reflections of individual participants against the broader patterns of views emerging from the group discussion (Creswell, 2012; Creswell &

⁹¹ There seems to be no consensus regarding the optimal size of a focus group discussion. The literature indicates different suggestions, for instance, that range from 4-6 participants (Creswell, 2012), 6-8 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hennink, 2014), to 5-15 (Babbie, 2012).

Creswell, 2018; Hennink, 2014; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The use of focus group discussion at the quality assurance agency is particularly useful, since the instrument has a capacity to provide insights on organisational issues and concerns (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This is vital, since the empirical investigation of this study focuses on the extent to which the quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education and the implications of this for the nature of the quality management model implemented in Ethiopian higher education. However, the study is aware of the disadvantages of focus group interviews, such as the difficulty it presents to the researcher in controlling the direction of conversations and group dynamics, challenges in distinguishing between voices of the respondents when transcribing audiotapes and the complexity of analysing the data (Babbie, 2014; Creswell, 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Table 5. Components of sample and method of primary data collection

Component of sample	Number of respondents	Method of primary data collection	Duration of data collection (minutes)*	
Higher education institutions	13	Interview	950	
Quality assurance agency	8	Focus group discussion	331	399
		Interview	68	
Governmental and non-governmental stakeholders	7	Interview	330	
Researchers and experts	5	Interview	379	
Total	33		2058 minutes (34.3 hrs)	

*This does not include the time spent on gathering documents and other secondary data

The two sessions of focus group discussions produced extensive, diverse and quality information despite the initial reservations of the researcher to do so. The personal experiences and stories told by these experts about the deceptions and violations of regulations for quality by private higher education institutions were particularly useful to the theoretical and empirical discussion. The study, however, only convened two focus groups, despite the suggestion from literature to have 3-4 sessions (e.g. Krueger & Casey, 2015). Nevertheless, in their thematic analysis of data gathered from 40 focus group discussion, Guest et al. (2017) found that two to three focus group discussion were sufficient to generate all the prevalent themes and about 80 per cent of all discoverable themes. Such evidence may establish the adequacy of the approach employed in the present study.

All focus group discussions and interviews, except one, were conducted in Amharic, the official working language of Ethiopia. The transcripts of these interviews were translated into English for analysis. One interview with an international expert was conducted in English. Similarly, all interviews with the exception of one were conducted face-to-face. The role of the researcher in the interviews and focus group discussions was mainly posing general open-ended questions, stimulating and moderating discussion and guiding the direction of conversation. The researcher also audiotaped all the interviews and focus group discussions with the oral consent of the respondents to enable an accurate recording of conversations and the transcription and analysis of the data.

Additionally, the relevant secondary data was collected through a review of documents. The literature indicates that researchers can gather valuable information from public and private records. The study reviewed several national and institutional documents. This include the national and institutional policies and strategies, education and training policy, higher education proclamations, senate legislations, institutional quality audit reports, institutional quality assurance policies and guidelines, strategic plans, institutional periodic plans, performance evaluation reports, statistical reports, official communications, minutes of meetings, report on the external review of the roles and functions of the quality assurance agency and the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) that is currently in the initial stages of its implementation at national level. The study also utilised the diary, interview and field notes and compilation of comments received from doctoral seminars that the researcher has kept throughout the data collection process. The journals that researchers keep in a research process is considered a valuable document in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Moreover, the study utilised textual and audio-visual information published on various local media outlets such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, official web pages and social media platforms. In some cases, the study took inputs from news stories and interviews with key officials and experts from HERQA and Ministry of Education broadcasted in mainstream media outlets. Such data was also used to enrich the discussion presented in Chapters Six, Eight and Nine. The use of data gathered from such non-academic outlets is justified as follows. First, these materials were crucial in enabling the researcher stay informed of the recent transformations and developments taking place within Ethiopian higher education that empirical research and academic discussion have not yet addressed. The literature recognises that documents can assist researchers in tracking substantive

changes and developments in the phenomena and context under investigation (Bowen, 2009). Such material assisted in enhancing the understanding of the research site and context. Second, the use of such supplementary materials is expected to improve the referential adequacy of the study. Third, the official social media accounts, such as the Facebook pages of HERQA, Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MOSHE) and the selected case higher education institutions were found to be effective platforms where these organisations more frequently communicate up-to-date information to the public and stakeholders about ongoing activities, latest developments, operational directives and policy trajectories. In contrast, the official websites of these organisations were found to be rarely updated, lack sufficient information and generally poorly maintained. Fourth, the researcher assessed the relative trustworthiness of the information obtained from each outlet and specific material. The researcher approached the information from these non-academic outlets with caution, focusing on factual data and excluding normative judgements and opinion pieces. The use of such data was mainly limited to providing evidence to substantiate arguments and rarely to make generalisations.

The data collection was conducted in various time-sets over a period of three years. The researcher gathered historical and legislative documents in 2016, piloted instruments in 2017 and collected the main research data in 2018 and 2019 through interviews, focus group discussions and documents⁹². This was because the researcher was based in Finland, and the data collection had to be combined with travels made to Ethiopia as part of the project activities the researcher was involved in the 'Building Institutional Capacity in Leadership and Management of Ethiopian Universities' (LMEU) project and for participation in a higher education conference hosted by Bahir Dar University.

The saturation of data was taken into account in deciding when to stop collecting data. The literature of research methodology shows that saturation indicates a point in a data collection where a researcher no longer gains fresh ideas, new insights and interesting perspectives, at which point it is advised to stop gathering more data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Accordingly, the researcher concluded data collection when the last two interviews sparked no further insights, at which point it was believed that the range of key ideas on the two research questions had been captured.

⁹² Details of the data collection and field work are attached in the appendix 4.

7.5 Thematic analysis

The study analysed the empirical data gathered through the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document review using thematic analysis. The literature indicates that thematic analysis is a method of qualitative data analysis that aims to identify, examine, analyse, compare and interpret themes that underlie raw sets of text (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Roberts et al., 2019).

Thematic analysis is often interchangeably used with content analysis. Despite similarities between the two methods, some researchers (e.g. Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Vaismoradi & Snegrove, 2019) argued that significant differences exist, such that content analysis often focuses on description of data and allows for quantification, whereas thematic analysis is considered to have a relative strength in enabling researchers to conduct a qualitatively rich, nuanced and complex analysis and interpretation in a way that captures the context of the data. Such distinctions are also noted in other studies (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Roberts et al., 2019).

Four main rationales provide the justification for selecting thematic analysis in this study. First, thematic analysis, as a common technique of data analysis in qualitative research, was found to suit the nature and purpose of the inquiry pursued in this study. It provides qualitative researchers with structured and methodical approach for describing and analysing the perspectives of respondents in detail, identifying patterns of similarities and differences, interpreting meanings and deriving useful insights (Nowell et al., 2017). Second, thematic analysis is applicable in qualitative research that are guided by an interpretivist or constructionist research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Such consideration is important, since a good thematic analysis is expected to interpret its data and draw analytical claims in consistency with the essence of the theoretical framework and research paradigm applied in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Third, thematic analysis was found to fit the nature of the data gathered in this study for conducting the inquiry. Thematic analysis aids in conducting a rigours analysis and interpretation on a set of texts, such as interview transcripts and extracts from selected documents (Caulfield, 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This technique of analysis accommodates both the primary and secondary data sets collated in this study. Thematic analysis belongs to the category of qualitative data analysis that involves a non-numerical investigation and interpretation (Babbie, 2014). Fourth, thematic analysis supports and provides the structure for within-case and cross-case analysis and drawing interpretations from the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2003).

Although thematic analysis can be applied both inductively and deductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Galanis, 2018; Roberts et al., 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013), the present study employed an inductive thematic analysis. Qualitative inductive analysis serves to condense and summarise raw textual data, provide a framework for analysis and link research questions with the findings derived from the data analysis (Thomas, 2011). Qualitative data analysis enables to identify, analyse and interpret key meanings, patterns and links between themes that underlie the raw data (Babbie, 2014; Thomas, 2011). Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82) explain that ‘a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’. An inductive analysis derives concepts, themes and general patterns from a detailed examination and interpretation of a raw data (Thomas, 2011). In the present study, the raw textual data is organised, categorised, coded and analysed to identify common themes and patterns, interpret meanings and generate broader insights about the trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions in Ethiopia and its implications for the nature of quality management models. The analysis involved an inductive approach to within-case and cross-case analysis of the qualitative data. While simplicity and flexibility of the data analysis process is considered to be an advantage, thematic analysis is criticised for being prone to subjectivity, inconsistency and lack of coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Galanis, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Vaismoradi & Snegrove, 2019).

The literature indicates that the thematic analysis of qualitative data mostly involves six major phases despite some differences in specific contexts. These phases include familiarising with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up the report of the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caulfield, 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In such an inductive analysis of qualitative data, researchers transcribe, prepare raw textual data for analysis, read and understand the contents of the raw text, create general and sub-categories, refine categories, reduce overlapping among categories and separate uncoded text and combine related categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Galanis, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017; Thomas, 2011)⁹³. The study followed these steps in analysing its data.

⁹³ Alternatively, Castleberry and Nolen (2018) propose that thematic analysis can be conducted in five steps comprising processes, such as compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting and concluding.

Accordingly, the audiotapes of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and translated into English. The transcription of verbal data constitutes a key step in organising data for analysis. The transcribed data and excerpts taken from relevant documents constituted the main text on which the data analysis was conducted. In qualitative research, unstructured text obtained from the transcription of the audiotapes of the interviews and focus group discussions provide the raw data necessary for conducting systematic analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2012). The researcher read and reread through the raw textual data to identify relevant themes and categories around which the data analysis was structured.

In the present study, themes mainly emerged from a combination of three sources. First, themes were developed through an open coding, i.e. the process by which a researcher develops concepts and categories by examining and questioning qualitative data (Babbie, 2014). Second, themes were derived from the research questions that constitute the focus of the inquiry. Third, the theoretical and analytical framework constructed based on the literature review to guide the empirical inquiry of the study also informed the creation of relevant themes. The literature shows that themes can emerge from a combination of these elements (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Galanis, 2018; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The prevalence of concepts and ideas and their degree of relevance to the research question combined with the judgement of the researcher provide useful mechanisms for determining themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, the researcher coded the raw textual data based on the identified themes. Coding involves categorising and classifying each units of textual data under specific themes and categories (Babbie, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Galanis, 2018). Pieces of the data that are considered to be conceptually similar or related in meanings were grouped under common categories. The concept of each theme provided the organising principle for the coding of data. The researcher developed a code book that contained the list, label and description of the meanings and attributes of each code. Besides providing structure for the data analysis, coding facilitates the quick retrieval and navigation through data (Babbie, 2014; Roberts et al., 2019). The researcher also wrote short memos or reflective notes to capture reflections on meanings, patterns and theoretical and methodological dimensions emerging during the processes of coding and data analysis. Memoing can assist researchers in recording meanings of codes, theoretical ideas, emerging patterns and relationships among concepts and preliminary conclusions (Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher conducted all data analysis procedures manually.

The analysis of empirical data in multiple case studies entails 'within-case' and 'cross-case' analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The degree

of significance attached to the analysis of within-case and cross-case variations, however, may depend on the specific context of studies (Gerring, 2007). Accordingly, the application of within and cross-case analysis in the present study has three key features. First, a detailed within-case examination was followed by a thematic cross-case comparison, analysis and interpretation. This approach assists in comparing themes from within-cases across other cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such procedure is recommended in qualitative multiple case studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through this procedure, the researcher derived and interpreted the lessons learned from each case. Furthermore, the data analysis adopted in this study approached each case in its entirety than focusing on the multiple units within each case. For example, the case higher education institutions were analysed as an institution rather than at the level of faculties and other academic and administrative units. Second, within-case analysis was more extensively employed in the investigation of the first research question than the second question, whereas cross-case analysis was applied more thoroughly and consistently throughout the empirical investigation into both questions. The study, however, recognises the difficulty of identifying frames that can provide structure and guide the cross-case analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 2006). Third, the cross-case analysis employed in this study tended to focus more on drawing contrasts between the categories of public and private case higher education institutions, but less across individual cases than initially expected. This was mainly due to dichotomy in the application of external quality assurance requirements implemented by HERQA for institutions operating in the two sectors. It became unambiguously noticeable through the process of the data collection, transcription, organisation and preliminary analysis of the data that the legal status of the case institutions, that is, whether they are public or private entities seems to be more relevant to HERQA than the individual identity of each higher education institution. It was evident that the respondents from HERQA tend to be grounded in such considerations when assessing the extent of a higher education institution's trustworthiness and shaping the way the agency conducts external evaluations and enforces regulations. However, the study duly recognised and addressed exceptions to such broad trends as the evidence, for instance, from the case of Admas University suggested.

Additionally, the study targeted system and institutional levels of analysis, since its inquiry is concerned with the trust between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions and its implications for the nature of the quality management models. Trust was discussed at the individual level only in limited occasions, for instance, while describing the allegations of corruption, which raised

issues of professionalism of the experts at the quality assurance agency and the staff in higher education institutions. As such, an individual level of analysis is commonly applied in the empirical investigations of trust in fields outside higher education such as behavioural studies, business and organisational studies, political science and others. This, however, seems less evident in trends within higher education research. However, exceptions can be found in the literature, such as the series of studies that explored the perceived role and effectiveness of trustees in the leadership of higher education institutions (Micheal & Schwartz, 1999; Micheal et al., 2000; Micheal et al., 2001).

When writing the report of the data analysis, the researcher used quotes and excerpts that capture key features of the themes and illustrate the arguments. The study interpreted its findings and empirical evidence based on the insights from the theoretical and analytical framework, consulting the literature and drawing comparison with the findings from previous studies. It is acknowledged that maintaining complete objectivity in the presentation and interpretation of evidence could be challenging in qualitative studies that are guided by interpretivism paradigm, since the evidence is 'produced, constructed, represented' in the course of the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 51). This could create a challenge in objectively representing reality and may raise issues of trustworthiness.

7.6 Trustworthiness: Credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability

The literature of research methodology proposes that the quality of qualitative research can be more appropriately assessed based on the criteria, such as trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability, rather than the less suitable criteria of validity and reliability that are derived from a positivism research paradigm and often applied in quantitative research (Armstrong, 2010; Babbie, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1985, 1994; Koch, 1994; Nowell et al., 2017; Reynolds et al., 2011; Thomas, 2011; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Amidst the criticisms directed at qualitative research regarding questionable rigour and inadequate systematic application of validity and reliability measures (e.g. Vaismoradi et al., 2013), the early works of Guba (1981) and Guba and Lincoln (1985) recontextualised the conceptualisation of validity and reliability in qualitative research into the concept of trustworthiness, which was argued to be established through addressing the strategies of credibility, transferability,

dependability and confirmability. When translating the terms often used in positivist and rationalist paradigms to their corresponding terms in qualitative research, Guba (1981) replaces internal validity with credibility, external validity and generalisability with transferability, reliability with dependability and objectivity with confirmability. These works have introduced the widely accepted and easily recognisable sets of criteria for examining trustworthiness in qualitative research. These criteria are argued to be more suitable with qualitative research that are guided by interpretivist or constructionist paradigm. The discussion below briefly consults the literature on how credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability can be addressed in qualitative research.

Credibility concerns the issue of ‘truth value’ (Guba, 1981, p. 79), which attends to how researchers can establish the confidence of readers regarding how truthfully their findings capture the perspectives of the respondents and realities of the context in which the studies are conducted (Babbie, 2014; Tobin & Begley, 2004). This raises the question of whether claims are supported with credible evidence (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Strategies that are argued to assist in addressing credibility concerns include conducting prolonged engagement at research sites, using persistent observation, employing triangulation⁹⁴ of methods, sources and investigators, carrying out peer debriefing, using stakeholder or member checks, collecting various referential adequacy materials, establishing structural coherence and corroboration, and conducting negative or deviant case analysis and considering rival explanations (Armstrong, 2010; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Galanis, 2018; Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008; Thomas, 2011; Tracy, 2010). The target of credibility is ensuring that findings of a given study are plausible (Guba, 1981).

⁹⁴ Some researchers argue that the concept of triangulation suggests that a single reality can be found or a given conclusion replicated through employing different methods, data, investigators and theoretical lenses, which may not be consistent with qualitative inquiries guided by research paradigms that reject the ontological notion of singular ‘truth’ and, instead, assume the presence of multiple and subjective realities such as interpretivist or constructionist paradigm (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008; Tracy, 2010). As a result, the concept of ‘crystallisation’ has been suggested as a more appropriate replacement for triangulation, since it follows a similar approach but accommodates complex, multidimensional and in-depth interpretations (e.g. Ellingson, 2008; Richardson, 2000; Tracy, 2010). However, Denzin (1978, pp. 292-293), in his pioneering work on triangulation, acknowledges that it is impossible to achieve complete consensus on ‘reality’ due to the differences arising from specific approaches to finding ‘truth’ that each method implies, users’ application of methods, users’ perspective and interpretation of the observed phenomenon and processes of continuous change that a phenomenon under observation experiences. Despite paradigmatic differences, both triangulation and crystallisation seem to highlight the value of using multiple methods, data, investigators and theories to increase the credibility of the data and the findings and interpretation drawn from it.

Transferability deals with the issue of how applicable the findings of a given study are with other respondents and in contexts other than the one in which the study was conducted (Guba, 1981; Nowell et al., 2017). It is argued that collecting ‘thick’ descriptive data, employing purposive and theoretical sampling, and conducting peer debriefing can be used as strategies to ensure transferability (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Tracy, 2010). The target of transferability is to make the findings of a given study context relevant and generalisable (Guba, 1981; Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Dependability is concerned with the issue of consistency, which raises the question of how consistent the findings of a given study are if the inquiry is replicated in the same context and with the same respondents (Babbie, 2014; Guba, 1981; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). Some of the strategies suggested to improve dependability include using overlap methods, conducting step wise replications and carrying out dependability audit (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Koch, 1994; Nowell et al., 2017). Making the processes of a research traceable, documented and justified can assist in achieving dependability (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The target of dependability is to generate findings from a study that are stable (Guba, 1981).

Confirmability is understood from the perspective of neutrality, which asks the extent to which the findings of a given study are solely based on the data collected from the respondents and the procedures followed in the inquiry, and not shaped by the motivations, interests and biases of the researcher (Guba, 1981; Tobin & Begley, 2004). The consideration of confirmability in qualitative research tends to focus more on ensuring the objectivity of data than objectivity of the researcher (Guba, 1981)⁹⁵. The literature indicates that confirmability in qualitative research can be addressed through carrying out confirmability audit, keeping reflexive journal and using triangulation (Babbie, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Providing adequate justification for all methodological and theoretical choices can improve the confirmability of qualitative research (Koch, 1994). The target of confirmability is to produce findings that are investigator-free (Guba, 1981). It is argued that disclosing adequate information on the specific methods, procedures and processes employed in data collection and analysis and demonstrating precision, depth and consistency of these processes can assist qualitative researchers in increasing the trustworthiness of their studies (Nowell et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2019). Such a reflexive and detailed account can enable the reader to assess the extent to which the methods and processes employed in a given

⁹⁵ Qualitative research also recognises that true objectivity is unattainable, only a socially and subjectively situated observation and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The qualitative researcher, hence, can be regarded as socially situated, rather than an objective and value-free inquirer.

study can be considered confirmable and demonstrate the strength and appropriateness of evidence from which key inferences, claims and conclusions are drawn. The use of code book can make the process of coding replicable, consistent and rigorous (Roberts et al., 2019). Moreover, the rigour of qualitative research can be improved with the help of detailed explanations of the purpose, goal and significance of an inquiry, details of methodological approaches, justifications behind changes made to methodological choices, clarity over the nature and type of data utilised and descriptions of the measures taken to verify and validate data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

It is argued that the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability together provide an assessment of the overall trustworthiness of a given qualitative research. Trustworthiness, however, may constitute a persuasion rather than an absolute proof (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Assessing the quality of qualitative research often tends to be elusive (Babbie, 2014) and its conceptualisation evolves across time and contexts (Tracy, 2010). It also must be noted that these criteria used in assessing qualitative research lack clear strategies and principles that guide their appropriate application (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). There is a lack of clarity about the nature of contexts in which each criterion should be used. These criteria may not also be equally applicable to the descriptive and interpretive orientations of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Their applicability may also vary depending on other details of a given research, such as the intent of the inquiry, nature of data, sampling and specific research paradigm. Moreover, arguments in favour of flexibility, improvisation, combination of strategies and context informed application can also be found in the literature, which question attempts aimed at adopting universal criteria in assessing the quality of qualitative research (e.g. Tracy, 2010). Despite these and other limitations, these criteria serve to remind and assist qualitative researchers to demonstrate trustworthiness and rigour throughout research processes. They also enable reviewers to evaluate the overall quality of studies.

Other indicators slightly different from the above four criteria can be found in the literature. For example, Tracy (2010) proposes eight key markers that can assist in evaluating the quality of qualitative research, which include worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics and meaningful coherence. Another example can be the work of Armstrong (2010) which identifies a rather lengthy indicators of merit in qualitative research such as immersion, transparency and rigour, reflexivity, comprehensiveness and scope, accuracy, claims and warrants, attention to ethics, fair return, coherence, veracity and

illumination. Moreover, in their review of the literature, Reynolds et al. (2011) found that the quality of qualitative research is mainly conceptualised in output-oriented and process-oriented perspectives. The review shows that the output-oriented perspective tends to focus on the validity, rigour, confirmability, credibility and trustworthiness of studies, whereas the process-oriented perspective emphasises qualities such as reflexivity, transparency, comprehensibility, responsibility, ethical practice and systematic approach of the researcher. An interesting distinction drawn in Reynolds et al. (2011) includes the differences in the methods recommended for addressing the quality of qualitative research. As such, the authors identified that the output-oriented perspective on the quality of qualitative research suggests the use of triangulation, member check, negative case analysis, theoretical sampling and peer review as key methods of improving quality. In contrast, the process-oriented approach highlights the value of the researchers' overall methodological awareness, use of field diary, record of methodological decisions and the researchers' understanding and involvement in assuring the quality of research processes. The above examples indicate the diversity of views and criteria used for assessing qualitative research. Despite differences in criteria, qualitative research is increasingly required to demonstrate robust rigour and credibility (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). The qualities of vicarious experience, trustworthiness and authenticity are valued in studies employing interpretive or constructionist research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The section below briefly explains the measures that the present study takes to address the overall concerns related to trustworthiness. This is important since the literature shows that qualitative case studies often encounter concerns associated with validity and reliability (Flyvbjerg, 2006, 2011). The fact that the categories of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability tend to overlap to some degree, particularly in the strategies used to address them (Guba, 1981; Reynolds et al., 2011; Tracy, 2010), justifies the approach of combining the discussion of the measures taken in this study, without the need to specifically link each measure to the respective category. The measures are discussed as follows:

Worthy topic. The study carried out an extensive review of previous studies conducted in the context of Ethiopia and internationally to concretely identify relevant academic, theoretical and empirical gaps, and locate the research problem that constituted the focus of its inquiry and frame its research questions. This is believed to ensure that the study engages a worthy, significant and timely topic.

Clarity and transparency of approaches. The study clearly explains the purpose of its inquiry, nature of the problem it seeks to investigate and the relevant gaps that justify

it. It provides a detailed account of its methodological approaches, the rationale for their selection and their relative advantages and weaknesses. It demonstrates its guiding research paradigm, components of its research design, sampling procedures, data collection instruments, field work activities and challenges encountered, and the methods and procedures of data analysis. It clarifies the types and sources of data it utilises to conduct its inquiry and the rationale behind each approach.

Prolonged engagement and persistent observation. Data collection was conducted by visiting the research sites multiple times over a period of three years. This is further supported by the pilot data collection that involved two interviews and one focus group discussion, which enabled the researcher to make necessary adjustments to the instruments developed for data collection, revise the rationale used in guiding the sampling procedures and identify additional data sources that can support triangulation.

Peer debriefing. The researcher went through frequent dissertation seminars at the Higher Education Group (HEG), in Tampere University, with a group of fellow doctoral students, colleagues and supervisors, and had supervisory checks and follow ups. This enabled the researcher to discuss each step and progress throughout the research process, cross-check the credibility of procedures employed and receive constructive feedback for improvement. The researcher kept a detailed book of comments that recorded the feedback received from these seminars and meetings with supervisors throughout all phases of the research. The peer debriefing is also expected to support the referential adequacy of the interpretation of the findings and the conclusion the study draws. Additionally, the dissertation went through internal and external reviews to assess its rigour, quality and credibility before the permission is granted by the Faculty of Management and Business at Tampere University for public defence. However, member-check could not be conducted due to two reasons. First, the relatively moderate sample size and the difficulty of distinguishing the voices of each respondent from the audiotapes of the focus group discussions rendered member-checks challenging. The second rationale was to avoid the possible complications that could arise from certain respondents rescinding or altering their statements given the prevalence of self-censorship, fear of consequences and the overall research unfriendly institutional environment⁹⁶.

Triangulation. Denzin (1978), the pioneering work on triangulation, identifies four major types of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation. The value of triangulation in multiple case study design, such as the present research, is noted by Stake (2006).

⁹⁶ A brief note on the challenges encountered during data collection can be found in appendix 5.

Triangulation improves the rigour of qualitative research by addressing inherent methodological concerns (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Accordingly, the present study employs methodological, data and theory triangulations. However, investigator triangulation could not be applied in this study since all the processes of the inquiry were carried out by a single researcher.

- 1) *Methodological triangulation:* The study employed multiple methods for collecting data, selecting case institutions and respondents and analysing data. Data was gathered through interviews, focus group discussions and document review. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling were utilised to select case institutions and relevant respondents. The thematic analysis of data involves within-case and cross-case analysis. Such an approach of using different methods in tandem is expected to complement the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of another and check the stability of data and the findings emerging from different methods. It also enables to ensure the consistency and complementarity between the available data and interpretations drawn.
- 2) *Data triangulation:* The study employs different types and sources of data to conduct its inquiry. Primary data was gathered from an extensive group of respondents, such as quality assurance agency, public and private higher education institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected experts and researchers. Secondary data was collated through a review of various national and institutional documents. The study also utilised textual and audio-visual information published on certain non-academic outlets to support its inquiry. Gathering different types of data from multiple sources is expected to serve the purpose of triangulating data.
- 3) *Theory triangulation:* The study applies a theoretical and analytical framework that is constructed by combining four key models. It employs the conceptual dimensions of trust to explore the extent to which the quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance in higher education. The implications of the extent of this trust for the nature of the quality management models is analysed through the combined lenses of the perspectives on trust building, the insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust and the quality management models. The study attempts to maintain the coherence and consistency of arguments when integrating the insights from each theoretical and analytical model. Such an approach is expected to enhance a triangulation of insights and

arguments across the theoretical and analytical models and perspectives. It also provides alternative explanations to the data.

Despite attempts at triangulation, the study concedes that qualitative research recognises the theory-ladenness and value-ladenness of facts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This highlights certain key issues: (1) facts and observation are seen to be interdependent with the lenses of the hypothesis and values through which they are viewed, (2) accepts the undetermination of theory such that the same set of facts can be equally supported by more than one theory, which questions the traditional scientific quest for a 'real' truth, and (3) involves an interaction between an inquirer and phenomenon under investigation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 20-21).

Referential adequacy materials. In addition to an extensive use of scientific literature, the study utilises some audio-visual data, reports, articles and archives, particularly from various non-academic media outlets, official social media accounts of case higher education institutions and other relevant institutions, such as the quality assurance agency (HERQA) and Ministry of Science and Higher Education to gather further evidence that corroborate key findings. The evidence from these materials further enriches the credibility of the findings and interpretation of the study.

Sampling (purposive, snowball and theoretical considerations). The sampling procedure employed in this study took into account the researcher's judgement about relevance and representativeness, referrals provided by respondents and, to a certain extent, a consideration of theoretical relevance. Majority of key actors and stakeholders in the quality assurance of Ethiopian higher education are included in the sample. This is argued to help select a sample that is representative, provides diverse perspectives and ranges of explanations and theoretically relevant.

Collect and provide 'tick' description. The study provides detailed contextual information and clarifies the characteristics of the contexts that may determine the degree to which its findings may be transferable. The extensive discussion presented in Chapter Six provides rich description of the quality and quality assurance in the context of Ethiopian higher education. Such discussion is expected to provide the necessary background information needed in making sense of the findings of the study and increasing the understanding of the reader regarding the context from which the specific findings and interpretations were derived. This is expected to assist in clarifying the characteristics of the contexts to which the findings of the study may be transferable and those where the study may provide limited insights. In doing so, the study attempts to elucidate the transferability of the generalisations drawn from its findings.

Audit trail and reflexivity. The researcher keeps diary of the research process, interview and field notes, code book and book of comments that can assist in examining consistency across the various phases of the research undertaking and the processes through which data was collected, analysed and the findings were interpreted. This allows to assess the extent to which the procedures employed in this study can be considered consistent with accepted practices. The use of code book facilitated, organised and improved the coding process. Moreover, the reflexive diary, field notes and book of comments clearly document and explain certain changes made to the focus of the inquiry and the methodological and theoretical dimensions. The study extensively explains the challenges faced with finding a suitable conventional theory, the problems arising from theoretical and practical misfits between the initially selected agency theory and context of the relationship between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions in Ethiopia and the decision to abandon the theory, and the rationale for constructing a theoretical and analytical framework by combining various conceptual dimensions, perspectives, insights and models. Such transparency about the challenges encountered and the adjustments made can provide evidences for the sincerity of the study, which is considered to support the quality of a qualitative research (Armstrong, 2010; Tracy, 2010).

Structural coherence. The study makes efforts to maintain the logical flow and consistency of arguments and interpretations of the data gathered from various sources. It attempts to establish a coherence of concepts and terminologies.

Comprehensiveness. The study makes a considerable effort to provide a comprehensive, diverse and balanced perspective of the key issues it discusses, such as debates on trust and accountability, the needs of higher education institutions and interests of external stakeholders, competing accounts on the causes of declining public trust in higher education, diverse conceptualisations of quality and trust, quality assurance and quality enhancement, accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management and other important issues. This is aimed at avoiding skewed, biased and one-sided discussion that would fail to capture the diversity of views found in the literature. Such an approach is expected to increase the trustworthiness of the debates, discussion and arguments presented in the study.

Contributions. The study concludes its inquiry by outlining the academic, theoretical, empirical and practical implications of its findings. It also compares its findings and the interpretation drawn from the data analysis with those of previous studies found in the literature.

Ethical inquiry. The study identifies and addresses key ethical concerns. It also explicitly discusses its limitations related to the methodological and other dimensions of the investigation.

7.7 Ethical considerations

The literature suggest the absence of well-established ethical codes for conducting research in the field of higher education and highlight the importance of paying attention to ethical integrity in research undertakings and other routine activities of teaching-learning and administration taking place in higher education institutions (e.g. Felicio & Pieniadz, 1999; Parsell et al., 2014; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). Medina et al. (2014) underline the pivotal role that ethical training has in the professional development of graduates from higher education institutions.

Qualitative research faces several ethical issues that broadly concern the entrance of the researcher into the field, participation of respondents in research activities, presentation of sensitive data, wellbeing of participants and various principles of scientific research (Babbie, 2014; Creswell, 2012, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Researchers need to anticipate and address the ethical issues that may arise prior to or in the beginning of a research and during the collection, storage and analysis of data, and reporting of findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study took into account the national ethical codes of Ethiopia and Finland, and the regulations adopted at Tampere University to ensure adherence to ethical standards through the course of undertaking its investigation. Accordingly, it strongly emphasised safeguarding the informed consent, respecting the autonomy, privacy and confidentiality of respondents, avoiding harm and ensuring data protection. The study observed the key principles of the National Research Ethics Review Guideline endorsed by the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Technology. The guideline accords special attention to respecting persons, safeguarding autonomy of respondents, obtaining informed consent, principle of beneficence and justice (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2014). These fundamental ethical principles were also found to be consistent with the protocol implemented by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012) on ‘respecting the autonomy of research subjects’, ‘avoiding harm’, and ‘privacy and data protection’. This protocol intends to guide a responsible research undertaking. The study further

consulted the University of Tampere's regulation on 'Research Ethics and Promoting Good Practice in Research' that was adopted in 2014.

The section below briefly explains how this study, as an inquiry within the field of higher education research, observed ethical guidelines widely accepted in social science research:

Informed consent. When requesting for the consent of respondents to participate in the study, the researcher explained several key issues in advance to enable the respondents make an informed decision. Some issues described to the respondents include the purpose and potential benefits of the study, the approximate length of the interview and focus group discussion, how the information gathered from the respondents will be stored, who will have access to the information, plans for utilising the information supplied by the respondents and how this information will appear on the final research report, the measures planned to be taken to safeguard confidentiality, what foreseeable risks the respondents may face as a result of participating in the study, the possibility of audiotaping the interviews and the availability of the research report upon the completion of the study. After such information was provided, the researcher only included those respondents who verbally granted their informed consent to participate in the study.

However, the researcher could only rely on oral consent, since seeking written consent for data collection could be particularly challenging and unsuitable in the context of Ethiopia. It is suggested that a prevalent culture of mutual distrust, suspicion and lack of openness in communication characterise the Ethiopian society (Yitbarek, 2007). Such cultural settings were deemed to render written consent unsuitable and, if not, counterproductive to the data collection and success of the study. As a result, requesting potential respondents to sign a written consent was believed that it could discourage them from taking part in the study, given the research unfriendly environment and the fear of possible reprisal as a result of the information relinquished. Similarly, Ridley (2011, p. 299) cited three main reasons why written consent may not be practical in Ethiopian context. First, relationships based on trust tend to be more important than written agreements and forms and, hence, seeking written consent may be regarded as a sign of mistrust. Second, requesting informed consent can be met with bewilderment and confusion on the part of the respondents. Third, the respondents with little education, or a limited understanding and exposure of research may consider a request to sign a form suspicious. Such arguments suggest the need to consider departing from the established procedure of seeking written consent. This also suggests that some ethical guidelines in research may not be equally applicable in all cultures and

contexts. Hence, the researcher made efforts to have potential respondents verbally express their decision as to whether they wish to be involved in the study. Additionally, the researcher obtained a separate consent from respondents to audio record the interviews and focus group discussions. The recording allowed the researcher to avoid taking extensive notes and, instead, concentrate on the discussion with the respondents.

Voluntary participation. The researcher informed the respondents that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interviews and focus group discussions at any point if they wished to discontinue. No respondent was deceived or forced into participating in the study. All potential respondents were given the opportunity to volunteer, withdraw or refuse to participate in the study. The researcher also clearly informed the potential respondents to not expect compensation, monetary or in kind, in exchange for the time and energy spent participating in this study or discomfort caused to them along the process.

Privacy and confidentiality of information. The researcher made efforts to ensure the privacy of respondents and the confidentiality of the information collected from them. When analysing data and reporting findings, the researcher concealed the identity of interviewees in order to ensure that the information incorporated in the published study could not be used to trace identities and, subsequently, to protect participants from any potential harm. The identity of the respondents was coded to ensure confidentiality where direct quotes from the interviews and focus group discussions were included in the data analysis. This ethical consideration was explained to the respondents in the process of soliciting their consent.

Avoid harm to respondents. A key aspect of obtaining permission for data collection involved assessing whether the study required undergoing an ethical review before the researcher began collecting data in the field. In this regard, consulting available ethical guidelines suggested that this study did not share characteristics with scientific research that require an ethical review according to the University of Tampere's regulation of research ethics. This is because the inquiry did not involve studying underage children, violate the principle of informed consent, or cause harm, expose security risk or subject participants to physical or mental intervention (University of Tampere, 2014). Notwithstanding, the researcher took precautions to protect the respondents from any harm they may incur as a result of participating in this study.

Permission for data collection. An ethical research is one that is approved by proper authority. The supervisor of the researcher was consulted on the progress of the research and the timing of the data collection. Once this was settled, the researcher

sought permission to conduct data collection from each case higher education institution, the quality assurance agency and the governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. Such measures were aimed at avoiding a clandestine gathering of information where formal approval for doing so has not been attained.

Some deviation from designed method. The researcher made certain adjustments that enabled selecting additional respondents based on the referrals from interviewees and conducting focus group discussions at the quality assurance agency although the original plan relied on employing purposive sampling and conducting one-on-one interviews. Such improvisation at the research site was deemed necessary where strictly following the planned approaches developed beforehand proved to be unworkable and when adjusting to the context was believed to benefit the study. This, however, does not mean that the researcher employed techniques that compromised the integrity of the methodological rigour. What the researcher did, instead, was to make use of other acceptable approaches that could produce better result in the specific context of the research environment.

Management of research data. Cognisant of the ethical duty for arranging data management procedures, the researcher securely archived the data collected from the respondents and case institutions. All audiotapes and transcriptions of the interviews and focus group discussions along with the documents collected as a part of the research undertaking were stored in a manner that ensure the privacy of information. Access to this data will remain in the hands of the researcher unless respondents consent otherwise.

Utilising information from informal discussion and casual encounters. Another ethical issue the researcher faced was the dilemma of considering the useful data obtained through informal platforms, where the respondents and sometimes including people not formally approached as respondents, intentionally and unintentionally shared information with the researcher that were considered to enrich the data analysis. This was a question of how morale and acceptable it would be to incorporate information exchanged through informal discussions into the data analysis. The researcher made efforts to include such information as additional evidence while clearly indicating the context in which the stories were captured⁹⁷.

Additionally, the researcher strived to remain conscious of own subjective biases, and to equally pursue data that support and refute such preconceived notions. This was intended to increase the confirmability of the findings obtained from the data analysis and their interpretations.

⁹⁷ This discussion can be found in Chapter Eight, section 8.5.4.

8 A QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY'S TRUST IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

This chapter presents the empirical investigation of the first research question of the study: *To what extent does the quality assurance agency of Ethiopia trust higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education?* Accordingly, the study explored the extent of the trust that the quality assurance agency (hereafter, HERQA) has in higher education institutions with respect to quality and quality assurance based on the four conceptual dimensions of trust discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework, namely concern, capacity, openness and risk.

The chapter present the analysis of the focus group discussions and the interviews conducted with the quality audit and accreditation experts from HERQA. Then, the analysis of the interviews with the quality assurance officers and senior management from each case higher education institution is presented. This enables the illustration of the perspective of HERQA as the trustor, followed by that of the case higher education institutions as the trustees. The analysis also utilise data from the relevant documents gathered from HERQA and the case higher education institutions. In consideration of the dichotomy that exists in the external quality assurance requirements enforced by HERQA on public and private higher education institutions, the chapter separately presents the results of the data analysis of the group of public and private higher education institutions included in the study sample. The chapter closes with a summary and discussion of the key findings.

8.1 Concern for quality and quality assurance

As discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework that was presented in Chapter Five, the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts a given higher education institution may depend on its assessment of the perceived concern of the institution with regard to quality and quality assurance. The assessment of this concern encompasses the procedures and processes that a quality assurance agency expects higher education institutions to implement to monitor the quality of education and meet the stated quality regulations, as well as the benefits that the

higher education institution aims to extract from these quality assurance processes. The perceived commitment of higher education institutions towards assuring and improving the quality of education, research and community engagement constitutes an important assessment of their concern for quality and quality assurance. Accordingly, compatibility in terms of the concerns for quality and quality assurance between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions is argued to increase the perceived trustworthiness of higher education institutions in the eyes of quality assurance agencies. Hence, an assessment of this concern is one of the four key dimensions through which the trust between HERQA and the case higher education institutions has been explored in this study.

8.1.1 Concern for quality for HERQA and Ministry of Education

As an agency tasked with the mandate for supervising the relevance and quality of the higher education offered by any higher education institution operating in Ethiopia (FDRE, 2003, Art. 80, 82), the main concerns of HERQA focus on ensuring that higher education institutions provide education, research and community service that are up to the quality standards and in line with the economic, social and other appropriate policies of the country (FDRE, 2003, Art. 8; FDRE, 2009, Art. 89). The vision, mission and objective statements of HERQA reflect these concerns. For instance, HERQA's vision focuses on excelling in the 'safeguarding, accreditation and enhancement of standards and quality in higher education' (HERQA, 2006a, p. 4). The mission of HERQA is to 'assure stakeholders that accredited higher education institutions are of an appropriate standard and that the programmes of study offered at these higher education institutions are of an appropriate quality and relevance to the world of work and the development needs of the country' (HERQA, 2006a, p. 4). Moreover, as suggested by HERQA's guidance on the focus area thresholds for institutional quality auditing, the agency accords special emphasis to the quality and standards of certain aspects of higher education institutions such as vision, mission and educational goals, governance and management systems, infrastructure and learning resources, academic and support staff, student admission and support services, programme relevance and curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment, student progression and graduate outcomes, research and outreach activities, and internal quality assurance (HERQA, 2007).

As the data from the interviews, focus group discussions and document review suggest, the extent to which HERQA trusts higher education institutions depends,

in part, on its assessment of whether each higher education institution exhibits concern and commitment for ensuring the relevance and quality of its study programmes, research undertakings and community engagement. It is evident that significant differences exist across higher education institutions regarding how they perceive, share and act on such fundamental concerns for quality. The data collected from the focus group discussions and interview indicates the existence of a shared understanding among audit and accreditation experts of HERQA, which has developed through the practical experience and organisational knowledge⁹⁸ accumulated over the past 15 years, regarding which higher education institutions are believed to be relatively more committed to upholding quality standards and adhering to regulations and which ones are known or suspected to pursue profit at the expense of quality and contravene regulations and evade inspections of the agency.

The government's ongoing Growth and Transformation Plan II (GTP-II) has set the overall goal for the education sector at all levels for the period 2015/16 to 2019/20 of raising the quality of education and consolidating the expansion of the education service coverage (FDRE, 2016). Such strategic government documents underscore the necessity of widening the access to and improving the quality of higher education to enhance its contribution to national development. Accordingly, the strategic goals HERQA has planned to achieve as a part of the GTP-II focus on supporting higher education institutions with increasing their student in-take capacity by developing their infrastructure and human resources, improving the delivery of teaching and assessment practices to assure the relevance and quality of higher education and strengthening the participation of stakeholders in the research and community service activities of higher education institutions (HERQA, 2015, pp. 7-8). Moreover, the Ministry's mission encompasses setting and safeguarding quality standards, ensuring the expansion of relevant and quality higher education, developing an inclusive education system and building the governance and management practices of higher education institutions (HERQA, 2015). As discussed in Chapter Six, the aggressive expansion of higher education in Ethiopia has been mainly fuelled by the desire of the government to use higher education as an instrument to facilitate economic development and poverty reduction, to build the human capital that is desperately needed to realise development goals and expand access to a rapidly expanding population of the relevant age group that is expected to enrol in higher education (Akalu, 2014; Saint, 2004).

⁹⁸ This implies the collective knowledge, skills, information and experience possessed, communicated and utilised by the experts at HERQA.

The government, through its Ministry of Education and, later, its Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MOSHE) since October 2018, directs HERQA to effectively regulate higher education institutions quality and safeguard quality standards. The regulative frameworks issued by the Ministry, including the higher education proclamations 351/2003, 650/2009 and the latest revised proclamation 1152/2019, and several other strategic documents, such as the Education Sector Development Plans (ESDP), directives and guidelines, aim at ensuring the proper oversight of various aspects of higher education institutions and the quality of their operations. This indicates the concern of the government and Ministry regarding the accountability of higher education institutions with respect to the public resources they receive, assurance of internal and external stakeholders that the education provided at these institutions satisfies the minimum quality standards and safeguarding of the credibility and reputation of Ethiopian higher education nationally and internationally.

8.1.2 Perceived convergence and divergence in concerns for HERQA and higher education institutions

The analysis of the focus group discussion and documents shows that HERQA interprets the perceived concerns of public and private higher education institutions differently. The data analysis identified differences in the way that HERQA views public and private higher education institutions. These differences can be seen in how HERQA perceives the driving purpose behind the establishment, motivation and commitment with regard to the quality and standards of higher education and the implementation of quality assurance and the scale of concerns posed for quality of higher education at public and private higher education institutions. These differences seem to inform the overall level of HERQA's propensity to trust public and private higher education institutions.

The data analysis identified greater compatibility among the concerns for quality and quality assurance between HERQA and the formal intentions of higher education institutions that are expressed in their institutional vision and mission statements, stated core institutional values, motivation for establishing internal quality assurance practices, institutional objectives set for internal quality assurance and institutional quality assurance policies and guidelines. Such compatibility in the explicitly expressed formal concerns seem to be relatively similar across the public and private higher education institutions included in the study sample.

The data analysis showed that, despite the convergence over the formally expressed concerns for quality and quality assurance, HERQA seems to attach greater significance to the differences in the perceived driving purposes behind the establishment of public and private higher education institutions. All the respondents from HERQA, i.e. the teams of quality audit and accreditation experts and the agency's legal officer, reported that public higher education institutions are established primarily to serve society by providing higher education services on a non-profit basis, whereas private higher education institutions are driven by a profit orientation. This contrasting assessment of reasons for the existence of higher education institutions in the eyes of HERQA seems to depict public higher education institutions as being naturally more concerned for quality and quality assurance, while the profit maximisation motive of private higher education institutions seems to be perceived as the pressure that dominates their institutional operations and compromises their commitment towards assuring quality and standards.

The data challenge the favourable assessment provided by HERQA regarding the concerns and commitment of public higher education institutions, since the engagement in profit-making, albeit substantially different in scale, is not been exclusive to private higher education institutions. The focus group discussions and interview indicate that public higher education institutions are increasingly engaging in income-generating activities, such as providing training and consultancy services, setting up business enterprises and providing tuition-based non-regular programmes delivered during the evening, weekend or, summer and through distance modalities. This is not unlawful since Article 66 of the higher education proclamation (650/2009) entitles public institutions to such income generation. However, the respondents from HERQA, despite being aware of such recent trends, seem to be convinced that the scale of such activities at public higher education institutions is much lower and that they engage in such revenue-generating activities only for the purpose of diversifying their funding resources. More importantly, these respondents claimed that public higher education institutions, unlike their private counterparts, do not engage in income-generating activities for reasons of financial survival, since they receive nearly complete annual funding from the federal government for their regular operations. The following excerpt from an interview broadly summarises the differences in how public and private higher education institutions are seen from the perspective of business and profit orientation and subsequent implications for their perceived commitment for quality:

Let's be honest. Private institutions are seen as a threat to the quality of education because they are profit-oriented organisations, but public institutions are not profit-oriented particularly in their regular programmes but the programmes they run on evening and distances basis are money-making. Public institutions are not that dependent on the money they make from such programmes delivered on non-regular since the teaching staff is already employed and paid by the budget universities receive from federal government. But private institutions are entirely dependent on the money they gather from students to pay salaries to staff and cover the cost of running every course. We know that private institutions by any case need to enrol students and those students need to progress through courses. If private institutions are too tight with evaluation and filter the academic progress of students strictly, then students may not be interested to enrol in those institutions. As a result, private institutions need to make compromises on those areas. Sometimes I think the question of financial survival is twisting their arms to engage in activities that pose threat to quality of education. I don't think they are in this situation because they wanted to. But public institutions are free from these pressures and their teachers can make proper evaluation of students' performances. I think it was necessary and appropriate to put in place regulatory mechanisms when private institutions proliferated. (WD1, 01.10.2018)

In contrast, the data analysis found a prevalent opinion among HERQA's experts that the business interest and profit orientation of private higher education institutions weakens their intrinsic concerns for quality⁹⁹. The arguments of these respondents seem to depend on the belief that for-profit private higher education institutions have a strong inclination towards minimising their operational costs and maximising their profit margin. The experts from HERQA seem to be rather convinced that the pursuit of profit maximisation at most private higher education institutions in Ethiopia poses an obstacle to cultivating an institutional commitment to quality, allocating the resources necessary for safeguarding standards, adhering to the regulations related to quality and implementing internal quality assurance practices. Moreover, these respondents at HERQA further indicated that most private higher education institutions are established, owned and managed by investors who come from the business world, which, in their opinion, leads to the dominance of the profit orientation over the academic motivations of these institutions. Accordingly, it seems that a well-established and shared understanding among the respondents from HERQA is that most for-profit private higher education institutions operating in Ethiopia tend to pursue profit-maximisation at the expense of quality of education and that strict external regulations through accreditation and licensing evaluations by HERQA are needed to deter such

⁹⁹ Most non-public higher education institutions operate on a for-profit basis except a few religious institutions.

tendencies. During a focus group discussion, an accreditation expert reflected on his previous experience which pertain to this issue.

I have worked in a private higher education institution owned by a group of investors and I have noticed that they have little experience and understanding of how a higher education institution is expected to operate. They are instead more interested in tangible things like the number of students they have and amount of profit they make. For me, explaining to them what quality of education is and why they should be concerned for quality felt more like trying to convert a person from one religion to another. (HACC2, 04.10.2018)

Another respondent in the focus group discussion further added:

Many private institutions see things in terms of finance, but not consider the financial loss and deterioration to their institutional image that they could sustain by pursuing profit at the expense of quality. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

As a result, the experts from HERQA seem convinced that most for-profit private higher education institutions have strong business interests which are believed to compromise their intrinsic institutional concerns for quality and quality assurance. According to the perspective of HERQA, 'it's good when the concern for quality comes from within an institution' (HAUT2, 03.10.2018). HERQA seems more inclined to trust those higher education institutions that it believes have an intrinsic motivation for safeguarding quality and share its concern regarding the standards of higher education.

HERQA's experts do not see all private higher education institutions in the same way. They recognise the presence of few exceptional institutions that they believe have demonstrated consistent commitment to ensuring the quality of education and properly abiding by the regulations that govern the operation of private higher education institutions, from student admission and the recruitment of academic staff to the administration of programmes and conducting problem-solving research and community outreach activities. The respondents indicated that such private higher education institutions are, in most cases, founded or managed by academicians. One of the accreditation experts stated, 'I have noticed that those institutions that are owned by groups of professors demonstrate better dedication, or, at least, they are worried for quality of the education they provide' (HACC2, 04.10.2018). The data analysis found that Admas University, unlike Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College, is seen by HERQA and its experts as belonging to the category of the few private higher education institutions that are considered to take the issue

of quality seriously, to make efforts to uphold the standards of higher education and have functional internal quality assurance procedures, practices and processes.

In the section below, the study presents the analysis of the concern associated with quality and quality assurance in the selected higher education institutions. The discussion first covers the public higher education institutions that are included in the study sample, followed by the analysis of the private higher education institutions.

8.1.3 Analysis of the concerns related to quality and quality assurance for the case higher education institutions

In the following section, the analysis of the concerns regarding quality and quality assurance for the case higher education institutions included in this study has been presented. This is expected to provide more evidence that can enrich the analysis of the concerns regarding quality in higher education institutions from the perspective of the HERQA respondents.

Mekelle University: Fulfilling vision and mission with quality and practical commitment

The analysis of the data gathered from the interviews of the staff working at various levels of the university's Quality Assurance Office and the relevant institutional documents suggest that the strategic objectives of the university focus on providing quality education, research and community service. All the key institutional strategic documents of the university that were reviewed by the researcher seem to suggest an aspiration to excel in the provision of high-quality services to society. The analysis found no explicitly stated intention that would suggest an inclination towards or a prioritisation of the generation of profit from rendering its services.

The review of the university's Quality Assurance Policy shows that the main rationale for Mekelle University to 'worry' about the quality with which it accomplishes its missions includes the concerns it has for improving its institutional competitiveness, building credibility and reputation, boosting the institutional image and visibility, securing customer satisfaction, ensuring accountability to customers and stakeholders and improving the morale and motivation of its staff (QAO, 2018, pp. 3-4). Mekelle University aims to become one of the top 25 universities in Africa by 2025. The report of a previous institutional quality audit also found that the vision

of the university is to become a centre of excellence for teaching and research (HERQA, 2008). Guided by the motto of 'We really care!', the university's mission is directed towards contributing to the advancement of knowledge through research, producing graduates who meet the established professional standards and contribute to economic growth and responding to various societal needs. A respondent stated that the university's 'ultimate goals are to benefit society and realise national transformation' (MKM1, 24.09.2018). The policy intends to serve the objective of directing, supporting and monitoring institutional quality assurance and enhancement activities for the purpose of safeguarding the quality of teaching-learning and assessment, research, community services and support services (QAO, 2018, p. 4). Correspondingly, the aim of the university's quality assurance activities focuses on realising the vision of the university by assuring and enhancing the quality with which its missions are accomplished. For example, the director of the internal quality assurance office underscored the significance of institutional efforts of quality assurance as the following:

We initiated internal quality assurance activities to improve the quality of our operations with the ultimate goal of supporting the successful attainment of mission and vision our university pursues. We realised that we needed to actively work on quality assurance if we are to systematically monitor to what extent our university is achieving its strategic objectives in a way that meets national and international standards. Quality assurance helps us assess whether we are providing community-focused services, undertaking problem solving research and producing quality graduates. (MKC1, 24.09.2018)

The university seems to have built its quality assurance upon the assumption that it would achieve excellence in its core activities by establishing performance evaluation procedures, strengthening internal quality assurance units and supporting the members of the university community to accomplish institutional missions with commitment and according to the specified standards. It believes that such conditions will enable it to meet and, where possible, exceed the specified quality standards when carrying out its core activities. Further reflecting the convergence in the concerns, its internal quality assurance activities and practices are guided by the working definition of quality as fitness for purpose, which has been directly adopted from HERQA.

Mekelle University recognises the serious quality challenges posed by the rapid expansion of the access to higher education, which has been taking place over the past 15 years both at the national and institutional levels. The university explicitly states the necessity of institutional quality assurance. The respondents reported that

internal mechanisms of quality assurance are needed 'to arrest quality standards which have been falling as a result of the very fast expansion in enrolment' (MKC2, 24.09.2018). The institutional motivation for establishing internal quality assurance units and developing an institutional quality assurance framework seems to stem from its growing recognition of the importance of maintaining the momentum of its overall growth and transformation without compromising quality standards (QAO, 2018). As such, a respondent indicated that the goal of the quality assurance office is 'to assure quality and enable our university to cope with the expansion in access' (MKC2, 24.09.2018).

The interview data and documents indicate that Mekelle University values the engagement of its internal quality assurance office when addressing institutional quality concerns and supporting improvements in operations. Such concerns for quality could be seen in the fact that the university had started practicing an earlier form of internal quality assurance over a decade ago, which focused on improving the professional development of the academic staff through instructional and language training, supporting the quality of teaching and learning and facilitating the development of academic resources. The university had carried out its first institutional self-evaluation and undergone an institutional quality audit by HERQA in 2008. The reviewed institutional documents indicate that this type of rudimentary engagement in internal quality assurance activities was later strengthened in terms of organisation, staffing and resources following the provisions made for institutional quality enhancement in the higher education proclamation (650/2009) (EPRDF, 2009, Art. 22). Currently, the university has specific guidelines and performance indicators for assuring the quality of institutional operations that are organised under ten focus areas, which are consistent with those identified by HERQA for institutional quality audits. As such, the university's internal quality assurance activities focus on the quality of their vision, mission and educational goals, infrastructure and learning resources, academic and support staff, student admissions and support services, programme relevance and curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment (QAO, 2018). The quality assurance office conducts quality audits of the performance of each college based on specific reference points and performance indicators that were developed in each focus area. In addition, the office utilises various checklists to audit the performance of the academic and administrative units against specific quality standards and criteria. A closer look at these checklists indicates that the quality audit at the level of the units focuses on assessing the quality of the duties and responsibilities, plans, capacity-building, work documents and tools, performance in terms of the implementation of quality

standards and the utilisation of the transformation tools adopted by the university and documentation. The audit requires the units to provide sources of evidence, often in the form of documentation, for their reported performance.

Wollo University: Striding for quality public services with inconsistent commitments at various levels

The analysis of the data gathered from the institutional documents and interviews with the staff working at various tiers of the ‘Institutional Quality and Relevance Assurance’ suggest that Wollo University takes into account quality and service to society when carrying out its core activities. The university envisions being ‘one of the top five universities in Ethiopia in terms of outstanding quality education, research, technology transfer and community services by 2025’¹⁰⁰. It considers its missions to be providing education that is relevant to socio-economic needs, producing competent graduates who fit the requirements of the national labour market and undertaking research that helps solve societal development challenges. Wollo University articulates its concern for quality and encapsulates its institutional intent using its motto of ‘Striding for Quality!’ through the application of science in the service of society. Such a formal expression of institutional intent seems to signal a concern for safeguarding the quality of academic functions, providing impactful public services and contributing to societal development. Similarly, the data analysis suggests that Wollo University has a strong motivation for serving society and fulfilling its social responsibility. The strategic documents of the university that were reviewed by the researcher, despite some inconsistencies, communicate no major profit-making goals.

Given the fact that the institution only became operational in 2007, the university did not have significant engagement with internal quality assurance until a few years after the higher education proclamation (650/2009). It later established an Institutional Quality and Relevance Assurance Directorate that was tasked with the responsibility of leading and directing institutional level efforts aimed at assuring and enhancing quality in terms of education, research and community engagement. The university seeks to use internal quality assurance mechanisms to realise its motto. The directorate is responsible for coordinating the quality assurance work of colleges and departments, ensuring the relevance and quality of the programmes and curricula, checking the quality of educational inputs, monitoring the standard of the

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.wu.edu.et/>

practical learning facilities and laboratories, monitoring the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), coordinating the Effective Teaching Skills (ETS) training for the newly hired teachers, providing training and support and identifying the strengths and weaknesses with regard to operations and supervising improvement efforts. Such internal quality assessment procedures help generate data and make judgements regarding quality and the relevance of its core activities. A review of documents showed that the university has established mechanisms for assuring that the necessary inputs have been fulfilled before a new programme is initiated, including the curriculum development and reviewing processes, the needs assessment for the programme, the qualifications of the teachers and the standard of graduate profile.

The quality assurance directorate has structure, staff and various tools for conducting quality assessment (CMHS, 2017). The organisation of quality assurance units at college levels is driven by the intention to enable Wollo University to maintain the structure, staff and quality assessment tools required to monitor the relevance and quality of the education provided. This enables the university to practically address its strong concern with quality. The data seem to suggest that the colleges of the university share the strategic concerns the university has for assuring a high-quality education, research and community service. For example, a coordinator of quality assurance and institutional transformation activities at a college portrayed the critical implications that quality has in the following words:

We feel that quality standards and quality assurance practices are more important in medicine and health Sciences because the quality of graduates will directly impact the well-being of society. We are responsible for ensuring their fitness for responsibilities expected of them at work. It would be catastrophic if our graduates cause injuries or death to their patients due to gaps in the education we provided to them. (WLY2, 02.10.2018)

In addition to assuring standards, Wollo University sees the value of implementing internal quality assurance for ensuring coordinated, consistent, comparable and standardised approaches in departments. Quality assurance at a college level was required to improve the consistency of the implementation and evaluation of teaching and learning processes across departments. It utilises quality assurance procedures at the college and department levels to ensure the academic standards and smooth functioning of the academic processes and monitor the satisfaction of students and staff through surveys.

Despite the formally expressed concerns for quality at the institutional level, the data derived from the interviews indicate the presence of varying levels of

commitment to quality and the implementation of quality assurance across the departments and units of the university. The data analysis revealed the existence of inadequacy in the appropriate commitment that should be shared by the staff and students in some units. It seems that the engagement in quality assurance significantly depends on responsible operation and the commitment and dedication to quality on an individual level rather than robust structures and systems. A respondent reflected on such issues as follows:

The major obstacle is the lack of commitment to quality assurance activities. Commitment and sense of ownership are lacking at many departments in our university. There is negligence. We could do no more than raising awareness and frequently reminding them. But the staff at some departments such as Pharmacy has demonstrated a strong commitment to quality assurance, may be because their staff are responsible and more experienced. (WLY2, 02.10.2018)

Moreover, the review of the documents indicates that Wollo University is not free from the challenges associated with the complex task of safeguarding quality. Its internal quality assurance activities tend to focus on teaching and learning, which partly explains the lack of proper coordination and periodic monitoring in the research activities of the university. The previous institutional quality audit further found that ‘research has not yet become part of the institutional culture’ (HERQA, 2014b, p. 8). It also indicated that the university has relatively better engagement in community service activities than in research. Cognisant of this challenge, the university has been allocating resources and competitive annual grants to promote the engagement of the academic staff in university-sponsored research projects. The performance review report of the university notes an increasing participation of the academic staff in research and community service activities as a key strength acquired in the academic year of 2018.

On balance, the data analysis found that Wollo University has a strong commitment to the provision of quality education and, in doing so, shares the concerns of HERQA regarding the quality of higher education and the institutional-level implementation of quality assurance. The university’s strategic objectives, intentions, focus areas and practical endeavours suggest that it values the provision of quality academic services to society despite the limitations of its engagement in quality assurance in terms of scope, functionality and impact. With the support of the quality assurance units at various levels, the university attempts to monitor the proper functioning of its 76-degree programmes, as well as the standards of student admissions, registrations, administration of courses, assessment of students, registration of grades and graduation.

Woldia University: Achieving strategic objectives through quality but paying inadequate attention to the implementation of quality assurance

The analysis of the interview data and documents indicates that Woldia University has explicitly expressed concerns for the quality of the services it provides and has put in place internal mechanisms for safeguarding the relevant standards set by the Ministry of Education and HERQA. The strategic aspirations of the university underscore the institutional intent to uphold high quality. Woldia University aspires to 'become one of the top ten African universities by 2020'. Its mission is to 'produce skilled and competent manpower by providing quality education, conducting result-oriented research and offering problem-solving community services'¹⁰¹. The university exhibits the strategic ideals of an institution that is interactive, engaged with its external environment and aspires to serve the society in creative ways, with a motto of 'Open Mind, Open Eyes!'.

After becoming operational in 2011, Woldia University established internal mechanisms for quality assurance in response to the higher education proclamation (650/2009) issued by the federal government that required all public and private higher education institutions to implement institutional quality enhancement. Accordingly, the university established internal structures for quality assurance that monitor the relevance and quality of the education it provides to its stakeholders and the public. In translating its institutional commitment practice, Woldia University set up a Quality Assurance Directorate under the leadership of the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Later, the university assigned coordinators for quality assurance with respect to education, research and community service at all eight faculties in an effort to expand and promote engagement in quality assurance at the grassroots level. A respondent indicated the perceived significance attached to quality assurance at the university in the following way:

Our intention is to use quality assurance to ensure that institutional mission and strategic goals are achieved with the desired level of quality. Self-assessment practices established by HERQA enable us to assess our performance in various areas such as continuous assessment, research and community outreach activities, and professional development of teachers. The contribution of our quality assurance office is crucial for the realisation of these objectives. (WB2, 01.10.2018)

The quality assurance manual states that Woldia University sees its undertaking of quality assurance partly due to its acknowledgement of the need to implement the policies, directives and regulations issued by the Ministry of Education and HERQA

¹⁰¹ <https://www.wldu.edu.et/>

to assure quality in education. A review of the audit checklist that has been prepared and implemented by the university indicated that Woldia University perceives its commitment to quality from the perspective that the government has accorded special attention and a substantial amount of funds to the education sector based on the notion that enhancing access to and improving the quality of education is essential for producing a skilled and competent workforce, which is necessary for realising major national goals with regard to development, good governance and democracy. Other strategic documents, such as the university's strategic plan, annual plan and performance reports on the quality assurance directorate, reiterate that it has become necessary for the university to assure quality and promote the institutional efforts and measures that enable the ensuring of quality standards. Accordingly, the university implements quality audits at the course, programme and institutional levels. The review of the documents indicates that another concern that the university aims to address through its internal quality assurance procedures is of establishing consistent approaches for assessing, self-auditing and monitoring the quality of programmes across departments.

The interview data show that Woldia University understands, shares and acts on the expectations that HERQA has placed on it for continuously developing its mechanisms of internal quality assurance and improving its institutional capacity for ensuring whether its study programmes are being delivered at the required standard. The current internal quality assurance activities include auditing, supervising and providing feedback on the quality of education from inputs to outputs. Otherwise, a respondent who is a member of the senior management of the university stated that, without integrated quality assurance procedures, 'teachers and department heads simply focus on whether courses are completed, and I believe that our quality assurance office is established mainly for the purpose of providing a systematic approach of monitoring' (WD1, 01.10.2018). The data show that the staff of the quality assurance office think that 'most of our department heads are fresh and don't have much experience and lack awareness about what is expected of them' (WD1, 01.10.2018). This highlights the value of providing support to the departments and their academic staff through periodic audits and supervision. However, the interviews with the quality assurance officers suggest that the university has limitations with regard to providing adequate attention to the implementation and integration of internal quality assurance at the grassroots level.

Admas University: Strong intrinsic and tangible commitment to quality

The analysis of the interviews, focus group discussions and relevant documents suggests that Admas University, in contrast with most of the private higher education institutions operating in Ethiopia, seems to have developed a strong intrinsic commitment and concern towards assuring the quality standards of its education, research and community service¹⁰². The data indicate that Admas University has taken the issue of quality seriously in both its strategic institutional aspirations and core operations. It shows that the university has built a strong reputation for commitment to quality and quality assurance in the eyes of HERQA, of the community of fellow private higher education institutions and of the public universities of Ethiopia.

The university has a functional and well-organised internal quality assurance system. Its structure consists of a central office and branch offices at the branch campuses. The quality assurance office has clearly specified 16 major duties and responsibilities that revolve around monitoring various units through internal audits, supporting improvements in core activities and safeguarding the university during external quality audits and accreditation evaluations. The interview data suggest that quality assurance at Admas University seems to be based on a relatively solid institutional commitment rather than a mere adherence to the external pressure and prescription of HERQA. When explaining why Admas University needed to establish internal quality assurance practices, a member of senior management stated that:

We needed quality assurance first and foremost for our own sake. We know that the benefit of quality is primarily for us. We established our internal quality assurance office because we believed that it will support our university to improve its quality and standard of operations. We have also realised that assuring the quality and standard of services we provide is necessary for the success of our university. Being in operations for 20 years has reminded us that we can't afford to compromise quality of education if we are to realise our strategic objective of becoming a reputable institution in this competitive private higher education market. (AB2, 08.10.2018)

Similarly, another respondent added,

We have taken quality assurance very seriously because we cannot develop further and become successful without a robust practice of quality assurance. Our internal

¹⁰² Respondents have repeatedly indicated during interviews and focus group discussions that Admas University belongs to a small group of private higher education institutions, including St. Mary's University and Unity University, which tend to be considered to have an exceptionally positive reputation in terms of their commitment to quality standards.

quality assurance office is not a kind of symbolic unit that you may see in some other institutions. The activities we undertake are not done for the sake of formality or to show to regulatory bodies like HERQA that we indeed have established quality assurance practices and fulfilled the requirements of the proclamation and other regulations. (AF1, 05.10.2018)

A review of 'Experience Admas', an internal biannual publication aimed at disseminating the university's good practices, indicates that 'creating consistency and a networked system across the university' was another concern for setting up internal quality assurance structures and committees at various levels (such as the senate, college and faculty levels), department and offices (Minda, 2017, p. 1). Moreover, the interview data indicate that the quality assurance system used is designed to integrate quality assurance at the grassroots level. The responsibility for quality assurance seems to be embedded across the various units of the university. A respondent explained the rationale behind such an approach in the following lines:

We believe that our staff who are at the forefront of quality assurance work must assure the quality of the job tasks they undertake every day. For instance, quality of academic services is expected to be first and foremost addressed by our teachers, researchers and students. The quality assurance office then assumes the responsibility for auditing, monitoring and following-up whether activities carried out at various units meet minimum quality criteria set by the university. (AB2, 08.10.2018)

The data from the interviews and focus group discussions confirmed the initial information available to the researcher that suggested that the implementation of quality assurance at Admas University has come to be increasingly seen by HERQA as a good example. It seems that HERQA has higher trust in the institutional commitment of Admas University than in the most private higher education institutions with respect to upholding and safeguarding quality standards. HERQA seems to have less suspicion that Admas University would compromise quality, engage in deception or commit gross violations of the quality regulations in a quest for profit-maximisation. The data indicate that HERQA's experts tend to have a positive overall outlook on the university and its perceived commitment to quality and responsible operation. They consider the university a responsible private higher education institution that has upgraded its institutional status from a small training institute to a full-fledged university with a number of branch campuses and has expanded its scope of operations through carefully executed planning, hard work and improvement of quality.

Admas University envisions 'being the most reputable private higher education institution in East Africa in terms of offering outstanding quality education, research

and community development by 2020¹⁰³. The university is in pursuit of the missions of providing quality education, producing competent professionals, undertaking research that helps solve socio-economic problems, rendering consultancy and short-term training services and providing the community service expected of it as an academic institution. Although it is unclear if Admas University has succeeded in realising this vision, the data show that the university actively and consistently communicates its vision and missions to its internal and external stakeholders through various communication channels and information outlets.

The university reported that it has gained several benefits directly and indirectly as a result of its internal quality assurance system. It was reported that the quality assurance office played a key role in helping Admas University gradually upgrade its institutional status from an institute to a university college and, eventually, to a full-fledged university. It audited and evaluated faculties, colleges, campuses and other internal units against the criteria defined for the respective legal institutional status, which allowed improvements to be made before external evaluations by HERQA. Summarising the views repeatedly brought up during the interviews with the respondents from Admas University, a respondent stated, 'Our university has progressed and developed to this level and has been able to get this far because of its implementation of a good quality assurance system' (AF1, 05.10.2018). Similarly, the interview data suggest that the university has been consistently passing accreditation and reaccreditation permit evaluations with 'little or no problem' (AF1, 05.10.2018 & AF2, 08.10.2018). This was again attributed to the practice of the quality assurance office to conduct internal assessments of the university's programmes in advance using the checklists prepared by HERQA to prepare for the accreditation and reaccreditation permit evaluations. This was claimed to have given programmes a chance to improve their application before the team of experts from HERQA conducted their site visits. One of the respondents reiterated, 'This has helped us identify our strengths and gaps in advance before the actual accreditation evaluations took place' (AF1, 05.10.2018). Moreover, the university has been able to expand its understanding and practice of quality assurance with the support of the quality assurance office. The university has now begun to use inputs for quality assurance that are beyond the available national standards set by HERQA and the Ministry and the external audit and accreditation evaluations carried out by HERQA. The university has also become a member of INQAAHHE, has participated in the International Quality Summit award, has repeatedly taken part in the Ethiopian Quality Award competition and is currently experimenting with ISO standards. The

¹⁰³ <https://www.admasuniversity.edu.et/>

university attempts to closely follow and learn from international and global best practices in quality (Minda, 2017). These activities provide evidence of the relatively strong institutional commitment to quality at Admas University.

Admas University actively promotes its internal quality assurance system and prominent achievements by actively utilising the discussion forums that are held between higher education institutions and governmental stakeholders (e.g. HERQA and the Ministry of Education and other ministries and agencies), such as annual research conferences on quality in higher education and the platform of the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions Association. These efforts may have helped the university build a positive organisational image among internal and external stakeholders in higher education. As a result, the quality assurance system of Admas University has been benchmarked on certain occasions over the past years by several private higher education institutions and, particularly interestingly, by certain public universities, such as University of Gondar, which is a nationally renowned first-generation public university. Such trends may have further reinforced the reputation of Admas University as an institution that takes quality issues seriously and is dedicated to safeguarding the defined quality standards.

The analysis of the interviews suggests that the university perceives external quality assurance requirements and evaluations positively, which includes the accreditation and audit carried out by HERQA. The data show that the university considers such external evaluations to have an intention and objective of supporting higher education institutions improve the quality of their operations and overall institutional standards. It is reported that the audits and accreditation evaluations conducted by HERQA's experts helped the university 'identify whether all programmes that are being delivered fulfil the stated minimum quality standards', 'maintain the positive image and reputation' it has in the society and 'avoid major quality problems that could tarnish the university's image over an extended period of time' (AF1, 05.10.2018). The data analysis also indicates the existence of a mutual positive perception and outlook held by Admas University and HERQA with regard to the concerns and commitment associated with quality.

Sheba University College: Competitiveness and commercial success

The analysis of the data gathered from the relevant documents and interviews with a member of Sheba University College's senior management and the director of quality assurance office suggests a combination of a formally stated commitment to quality and quality assurance with a tendency of prioritising profit-making and

financial survival in practice. Sheba University College, with its motto of ‘Quality of Education with a Sense of Responsibility’, pursues a vision of becoming ‘one of the most prestigious universities and centres of excellence in academic and research in the country so as to improve the wellbeing of the society’¹⁰⁴. The institution has formulated its vision, mission and educational goals in line with the national development agenda. Its mission is articulated as ‘to provide marketable, commercially and industrially relevant education and training through enhanced quality education to provide a professional workforce’ (QAO, 2017b). These expressions indicate an aspiration to provide the kind of higher education services for which a demand exists in the higher education market and labour market. The mission statement also seems to imply a relatively pronounced emphasis on the commercial aspect of operations.

The data analysis indicates that Sheba University College has established an internal quality assurance office with the intention of supporting its overall academic and administrative operations. The previous institutional quality audit carried out by HERQA concluded that Sheba University College seems to have understood the importance of assuring the quality of the education it offers for its stakeholders (HERQA, 2011b). The strategic documents of the institution seem to confirm these intentions. For example, the annual work plan of quality assurance for the 2017/2018 academic year underscores such a combined rationale for operating while accounting for quality and quality assurance as:

As a private higher education institution, Sheba University College believes with a sense of responsibility that learners must be protected in getting quality programmes that meet national standards. The university college also understands unless it provides programmes that are of high quality, it will not survive as long as the learner-consumer has the freedom to choose where he or she wishes to study. (QAO, 2017b, p. 1).

Similarly, the interview data indicate a tendency of institutional ambition to utilise quality assurance as an instrument to improve the institution’s capacity for attracting more students and, subsequently, becoming more profitable. For instance, a respondent explained why the Sheba University College needed to establish internal quality assurance practices in the following words:

What we aim to benefit from our quality assurance practices is to increase our competitiveness in the private higher education market by improving the quality of our graduates and their employability. We can attract more students and become

¹⁰⁴ <https://shebauc.page.tl/> and <https://www.suc.edu.et>

financially profitable only if we provide quality education. That's why quality assurance is beneficial to us. (SG1, 25.09.2018)

Despite the reported positive concerns and internal commitment to quality and quality assurance, the data also highlight claims of the university college tending to prioritise profit-maximisation. For instance, the quality assurance officer of the institution reported observing 'a determination to not lose profit' and 'a strong interest towards pursuing profit despite the fact that, sometimes, the measures taken could compromise the quality of education' (SG1, 25.09.2018). Such possible inconsistencies between the level of formally stated and actual commitment could constrain the implementation of internal quality assurance practices and the amount of resources allocated to it. In the first-quarter report of the quality assurance office in 2017, some of the main challenges that the office encountered was a deficiency of adequate and appropriate human and material resources for quality assurance and a lack of cooperation and responsiveness from certain departments and units of the university college with regard to various quality assurance related procedures and practices (QAO, 2017c).

The data analysis found that Sheba University College takes into account other rationales, in addition to financial and profit justification, when fulfilling its responsibility of ensuring the quality of the education it provides. The interview data suggest that the university college perceives the necessity of the engagement in internal quality assurance procedures, practices and processes partly as a demonstration of the social accountability that higher education institutions have to the public they serve. Another rationale behind implementing internal quality assurance practices seems to be aligned with the need to address the quality concerns posed by the rapid increase in the number of students and programmes. The interview data suggest that Sheba University College understands that it needs internal mechanisms for monitoring quality to 'curb the effects of the huge expansion in access on quality and standards of education' (SG1, 25.09.2018). Over the years, Sheba University College has made efforts to put in place formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of its programmes (QAO, 2017a) despite the limitations in their application.

Medco Bio-Medical College: Commitment to quality forgotten in a state of existential 'crisis'

The formally stated strategic objectives of Medco Bio-Medical College seem to underline a focus on quality and societal development. Its vision, mission and main objectives focus on 'providing quality education and training to produce academically qualified, professionally skilled and ethically committed citizens' to satisfy the country's alarming need for skilled manpower in the areas of health¹⁰⁵. The college aims to contribute to tackling the lack of qualified personnel in the health sector of Ethiopia.

The review of the available documents and the analysis of the data generated from the interviews with a member of senior management and a quality assurance officer suggests that Medco Bio-Medical College, as a pioneering private medical higher education institution, has existed for decades and, by and large, built a positive reputation with respect to providing quality education and research. This reputation however has recently been challenged, and the future of the college is uncertain. In recent years, the college has gotten entangled in controversies, and its relationship with HERQA has been deteriorating following the termination of some of its degree programmes, including Nursing, Health Officer and Pharmacy, in 2016. This occurred due to HERQA finding that the college had fallen short with regard to certain minimum quality standards that were required for granting accreditation and reaccreditation permits (Mohammed, 2016). The interviews suggest that respondents from the college attribute the recent closure of the programmes to personal conflicts and an exchange of insults between the owner and manager of the college, a member of HERQA's senior leadership and some experts of HERQA during their site visit to the college as a part of the accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations. The interviews revealed allegations against certain experts and members of the leadership from HERQA of coercing the college to 'pay a bribe' in order to receive favourable decisions regarding the accreditation and reaccreditation permit evaluations as the main cause for the controversy and deterioration of the relationship between the two entities (MBM1, 06.10.2018 & MBB2, 08.10.2018).

Additionally, the interviews conducted with selected experts and researchers in field of quality assurance, Medco's quality assurance officer and some interviews conducted with HERQA's experts depicted an image of Medco Bio-Medical College as a private higher education institution that is established and properly managed by a competent researcher who shares traditional academic values and concerns

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.medcobiomed.net/>

regarding the quality of education. This suggests that, despite its recent problems, Medco Bio-Medical College does not seem to be seen in the same way as many private higher education institutions that are often suspected of pursuing profit at the expense of quality and disregarding regulations. Several respondents were aware of the fact that the college is owned and managed by an academician and researcher in the field of health sciences who studied in a Swedish university and, thus, seem to have confidence that the college is not driven by commercial aspirations. The following excerpt from an interview summarises the personal motivation of the owner as a key foundation for the academic value of the college:

I am an academician myself and I opened the first medical college in Ethiopia after returning from my studies abroad because I knew that this is something that I could contribute to our country. I am interested in providing a good social service to society. Otherwise, I could get more money by renting the building I have constructed for the college instead of using it to provide education. I can give you an example. I could get around a million ETB¹⁰⁶ a month if I rented this building, but I would get may be net 100,000 ETB¹⁰⁷ a month from running the college. There is a substantial gap between these two. But I do this because I believe I am a born researcher and I see it as my main goal in life. I cannot be a businessman because I have strong academic and professional values. And providing good quality education is a task I know I can do well. (MBM1, 06.10.2018)

Moreover, Medco seems to have a positive image, in contrast to several private higher education institutions, for the facilities it uses to provide practical learning to its students. It also provides its education and training in a building that it owns and has constructed for education purposes. This may partly indicate the commitment the college has developed since its establishment to providing quality education.

In spite of this, the interview data suggest that the college currently gives considerably inadequate attention to implementing internal quality assurance. The staff that is assigned to work on quality assurance is, in practice, fully engaged with teaching responsibilities, and internal endeavours aimed at assuring and enhancing the quality of education and research seem nearly abandoned. At the time of data collection in October 2018, the researcher discerned that Medco has relatively the weakest internal quality assurance structure, resources and activities compared to the rest of the public and private higher education institutions included in the study sample. The college seems to attribute the neglect of its internal quality assurance to the ‘demoralisation’ it has experienced following the closure of its programmes by

¹⁰⁶ Approximately 36,467 USD at the time of the data collection.

¹⁰⁷ Approximately 3646 USD at the time of the data collection.

HERQA due to the controversies surrounding the unmet minimum standards related to (as indicated in the interviews) the required human resources at the college and the tension with HERQA (MBB2, 08.10.2018 & MBM1, 06.10.2018)¹⁰⁸. The review of the report of Medco's previous institutional quality audit, undertaken by HERQA, revealed that the college had failed to fulfil the national standard set by the Ministry of Education for the composition of the full-time academic staff who are supposed to hold either bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees (HERQA, 2014a). The report indicated that the internal quality assurance office of the college is barely functional, which shows that no further activity was undertaken by the college to further develop a comprehensive quality assurance policy and integrated quality assurance procedures, practices and processes. The commitment of the college to quality assurance seems to be mostly limited to establishing a quality assurance office and assigning a coordinator for the office. In this regard, the institutional audit concluded that the college has 'no sound commitment to quality education that can be shared by the staff and students' of the college's community (HERQA, 2014a, p. 6). The quality assurance officer of the college explained that the 'interest and commitment of the owner of our college to quality assurance implementation began to decrease after the college started having problems with HERQA' (MBB2, 08.10.2018). Although such claims help in better understanding the context in which the college is currently functioning, they hardly seem to be convincing arguments for its evident neglect of internal quality assurance implementation. It seems that the college has externalised the reasons for abandoning its internal quality assurance and seemingly compromising the academic and professional values it was reported to have been shaped by for a majority of its existence.

8.2 Institutional capacity for quality and quality assurance

As discussed in Chapter Five, in the context of this study, the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts a higher education institution can depend on an assessment of the capacity, in addition to the concern and commitment, of the respective institution for effectively carrying out quality assurance. This requires a quality assurance agency to evaluate the adequacy of the overall institutional capacity

¹⁰⁸ The operations of the college have weakened significantly after some of its programmes were forced to be closed and a sizable number of its students were transferred to another private higher education institution in order for them to continue their studies.

and competence of higher education institutions with regard to effectively implementing, supporting and coordinating internal quality assurance practices and fulfilling the requirements for quality and standards in higher education. Such assessments encompass the human, financial and material resources at the disposal of internal quality assurance units, the quality assurance instruments and tools employed in the quality assurance procedures and the support given by the leadership to the overall institutional endeavours that are aimed at assuring and enhancing quality. A quality assurance agency, depending on the context, may also take into account factors such as the size, age and legal and institutional statuses of the higher education institutions.

8.2.1 Financial resource as a key element of overall institutional capacity

As the data from the interviews, focus group discussions and document reviews suggest, the extent to which HERQA trusts higher education institutions in Ethiopia with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education depends, in part, on its assessment of whether each higher education institution possesses the adequate overall institutional capacity that is necessary for ensuring the relevance and quality of its study programmes, research undertakings and community engagement. The findings of the data analysis suggest, as with the assessment of concern and commitment, the existence of a shared understanding among audit and accreditation experts of HERQA that most public higher education institutions have a better institutional capacity and resources at their disposal for providing quality services and supporting internal quality assurance efforts. On the contrary, the majority of private higher education institutions are generally considered to lack the adequate capacity and resources needed for quality assurance.

Respondents attributed the differences in the perceived overall institutional capacity of public and private higher education institutions to various aspects. The experts at HERQA understand that public higher education institutions receive nearly full funding, human and material resources and political and administrative support from the federal government, which they argue enables these institutions to be relatively more capable with regard to internal quality assurance. Public higher education institutions receive additional funds from conducting income-generating activities. They also receive additional financial, material and technical support through development partners and international collaboration. By Ethiopian standards, the academic staff with the relatively highest qualifications are employed,

by and large, at public higher education institutions. They are also allocated students of higher calibre. This could be seen primarily as a product of the structure of the higher education system in Ethiopia, wherein students who score the minimum required points in the 'Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Qualification Certificate' (EHEEQC) examination are assigned centrally to public higher education institutions by the Ministry of Education. The student population of private higher education institutions has typically comprised low-performing students (Nega, 2017) who are academically dismissed from the public higher education institutions for failing to make satisfactory academic progress. Further, this population also includes students who do not wish to enrol into their assigned public universities for various reasons, or those whose parents could afford tuition fees¹⁰⁹ and working professionals who wish to improve their qualifications by attending programmes that are delivered through evening, weekend and distance classes. This is further reflected by the considerable difference in the enrolment proportions of the two sectors. Public higher education institutions contribute about 84 per cent of the total enrolment in higher education, whereas the private higher education sector, although consisting of a large number of smaller institutions, contribute only about 16 per cent of the total enrolment (HERQA, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2016).

In contrast, experts from HERQA state that most private higher education institutions have limited financial, material and human resources. They fully rely on non-public funds that are gathered mainly through tuition fees, since they are not entitled to receive funding and other forms of financial support from the government. The respondents indicated that the capacity of a private institution mostly depends on the financial capacity of the owner or owners of the institution. Some owners have a strong financial standing but have little understanding of the value of quality in education. It was argued that such owners often can 'cripple their own institution' (HACC2, 04.10.2018). However, those private higher education institutions that are owned by groups of academics or professors were reported to be more likely to accord greater emphasis to allocating the resources that are essential for institutional quality assurance efforts. The data from the focus group discussions and interviews clearly indicated the concern of the respondents from HERQA that the engagement of a majority of private higher education institutions in internal

¹⁰⁹ Public higher education institutions provide students with boarding, lodging and education without upfront payment. Students are only required to fulfil the responsibility of cost-sharing, which is paid as a form of graduate tax or through service within 10 years after graduation. The cost-sharing covers the full costs related to boarding and lodging and a minimum of 15 per cent of the tuition cost.

quality assurance, beyond financial constraints, tends to be challenged by their pursuit of profit and corresponding interest in cost minimisation. Moreover, private institutions in Ethiopia generally tend to have limited participation in academic and development collaborations with overseas partners. The calibre of their academic staff and students is also considered to be significantly less than their public counterparts by HERQA's experts. During the focus group discussion with the team of quality audit experts at HERQA, a respondent summarised such HEQA's perceived differences regarding the overall institutional capacity of the public and private higher education institutions in the following way:

There is a difference between the capacity level of public and private institutions. I don't think public institutions have limitations when it comes to capacity and resources needed to properly implement quality assurance and safeguard standards of quality in higher education. Public universities are resourceful. However, there are problems in private institutions when it comes to capacity because they are established with the primary intent of profit-making orientation. They want to minimise costs and save resources where possible. These institutions often consider people who work in the position of quality assurance as those who carry out additional or non-essential activities. As a result, quality assurance is in many cases assigned as an extra responsibility to staff who are either in department head or other positions. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

Another respondent elaborated the perceived overall differences in the capacity between the public and private higher education institutions from the perspective of HERQA as follows:

Public higher education institutions don't have capacity limitations and shortage of facilities at the scale private institutions do. Public institutions have less quality problems for instance the number of students they enrol are centrally determined by the Minister of Education and institutions don't enrol even a single student below the entry criteria. Public institutions have better resources and institutional capacity to provide quality education. They don't have problem with employing teaching staff who do not meet qualification criteria. The infrastructure that public institutions need are fulfilled with the budget of the federal government. Private institutions on the other hand have serious financial and economical limitation. They need to pay hefty bill for the facilities from where they deliver their programmes. (HLAS, 15.02.2019)

These results indicate that the quality assurance experts from HERQA share the opinion that public higher education institutions have a relatively better overall institutional capacity than private higher education institutions for internally assuring and enhancing the quality of their education, research and community service activities. This portrays a shared opinion among the staff of HERQA that public

higher education institutions are more capable and trustworthy than most of their private counterparts in terms of quality and quality assurance.

8.2.2 Internal structure and organisation for quality assurance

The focus group discussion with the teams of quality audit and accreditation experts from HERQA indicates that a majority of the public higher education institutions and a sizeable number of the private institutions have already set up internal structures and units for quality assurance, have developed relevant policies, tools and instruments and have started implementing the procedures and practices of assessment. The structure of the quality assurance units at many institutions includes an office or directorate for quality assurance at the institutional level, coordinators of quality assurance at faculty, college or branch campus levels and standing or ad hoc committees for quality assurance. Respondents stated that, previously, internal quality assurance units at higher education institutions were mostly accountable to the offices of the academic vice presidents. Based on the recommendations of HERQA during audits and accreditation evaluations, these entities are now mostly directly answerable to the office of the presidents. The main reason for this was the argument that this restructuring could help enhance the empowerment and autonomy of these internal units by assigning them the responsibility of supervising and monitoring the quality of the institution's operations.

The analysis of the data generated from the focus group discussions and interviews with the respondents from HERQA identified two main problems with the existing structures and organisations formed for internal quality assurance at most public and private higher education institutions. First, there is poor engagement in the implementation of quality assurance at the grassroots level. The structure and organisation of quality assurance often appears to be good at the top level but becomes non-functional towards the bottom levels. It becomes problematic and, at times, non-existent at the lower tiers of the institutions. It was reported that these structures may become active during external monitoring and evaluations by HERQA and the Ministry of Education. Even worse, the respondents argued that higher education institutions, in some cases, engage in a symbolic compliance to the external requirements regarding internal quality assurance. A respondent commented during a focus group discussion:

I have observed that private institutions often tend to put in place some kind of pseudo structure for quality assurance just for the sake of formality and as a way of responding nominally to the requirements enforced by HERQA. This is to appease

our experts when they go for quality audit and accreditation permit evaluations. This is a lack of knowledge and awareness. Also, at the public institutions, the establishment of quality assurance structures seems to be for the sake of responding to the requirements specified in the higher education proclamation. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

Another issue is the lack of consistency, where main campuses have better quality assurance units, while branch campuses lack the comparable resources required. Second, internal units and structures for quality assurance lack the engagement of stakeholders. The participation of students in, for instance, the preparation of the self-evaluation reports is considered to be minimal. The respondents recalled instances where the self-evaluation reports were prepared entirely by a single individual. These units lack sufficient participation by the academics, administrative staff and students. Documents prepared in this manner could be the least beneficial and useful to institutions.

In spite of the generally positive perception of the concerns that public higher education institutions have regarding quality and their overall institutional capacity for internal quality assurance, the respondents from HERQA raised two key issues. The main problem they face is often attitudinal, which relates to institutions attaching less importance to quality assurance. This results in the integration of the responsibilities associated with quality assurance with other responsibilities, including coordinating institutional transformation, supporting research and supervising the implementation of management reform tools such as Deliverology, Balanced Scorecard (BSC) and Kaizen. The staff members who are to work on quality assurance thus easily get overloaded with other tasks. Interestingly, the respondents from HERQA conceded that 'those private institutions who have understood this problem and assigned designated personnel exclusively for quality assurance have managed to achieve greater success' (HAUT3, 03.10.2018). Another problem in public higher education institutions is that internal quality assurance units tend to focus on quality control and the inspection of departments, which arises from misunderstanding how quality assurance should be carried out. The respondents maintain that this lack of awareness and the inadequacy of commitment explain why the staff of internal quality assurance units tend to limit their activities to routine and less impactful evaluations such as focusing on approving examinations and the time management of the academic staff. It is argued that engagement with developing quality assurance tools and instruments, raising awareness about quality issues, providing support and building capacity, and

establishing systematic and integrated quality assurance procedures, practices and processes have mostly remained unsatisfactory.

8.2.3 Human resources in internal quality assurance units

The respondents from HERQA mostly share the opinion that, public higher education institutions have relatively greater human resources allocated to guiding, coordinating, monitoring and implementing internal quality assurance activities than their private counterparts. The focus group discussion suggests that the respondents associate the perceived difference in the human resource capacities to the considerable gap in the overall financial resources that are at the disposal of public and private higher education institutions. Public higher education institutions are considered to be capable of hiring and allocating staff based on the needs of their internal quality assurance units. In contrast, the respondents argue that most private higher education institutions, due to their significant limitations in terms of financial resources and the pressure created by having a profit-seeking and maximising orientation, have not been able to adequately staff their internal quality assurance units.

Despite such differences, the respondents stated two key challenges associated with human resources for internal quality assurance that are observed in both public and private higher education institutions. The first problem pertains to the nature of the responsibilities assigned to the staff members who are in charge of quality assurance. The staff of the internal quality assurance units of most public higher education institutions are tasked with multiple responsibilities for teaching and research, which creates a high workload and a tendency to neglect the activities directly related to quality and quality assurance. At private institutions, there is a tendency of integrating the responsibilities associated with quality assurance with the coordination of other academic and administrative activities. In practice, quality assurance is merged with other routine, miscellaneous and, at times, unrelated administrative responsibilities. It was reported that higher education institutions tend to lack clarity regarding the duties that internal quality assurance units are required to carry out, even though Article 22 of the higher education proclamation (650/2009) specifies these explicitly (EPRDF, 2009). The respondents highlighted that quality assurance has still not become a full-time responsibility for the staff of the internal quality assurance units of a majority of public and private higher education institutions. This is argued to demoralise and constrain the capacity of

such staff members to develop internal quality assurance systems. These challenges may also be understood, in part, as ‘reflections of the substantive degree of emphasis attached to quality assurance at the institutional level’ (HAUT1, 03.10.2018). The data show that a few public higher education institutions, and a significant number of private ones, have managed to establish full-time positions for quality assurance. Another key challenge has been the rate of turnover in the quality assurance personnel at higher education institutions, which is argued by the respondents to have created inconsistency and a lack of continuity in operations and, in certain cases, caused deterioration with regard to quality assurance after progress had previously been made. The respondents from HERQA and the case higher education institutions pointed out that these adverse effects of the high turnover can be worrisome, as progress in quality assurance has so far depended more on individual efforts rather than a systematic structure and institutionalisation. Moreover, the respondents also conveyed that the turnover in institutional management frequently disturbs the continuity of internal quality assurance. For example, a respondent recalled such an instance:

One big problem I have observed at public institutions is the high turnover of personnel working in leadership and management positions, such that in one case for example, when we went back to an institution for follow up after an audit, we learned that the university president who replaced the previous one was not even aware that the institution went through an audit. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

8.2.4 Recruitment and staffing for internal quality assurance units

The focus group discussion and interview data showed that the respondents from HERQA have observed certain common problems in the recruitment and staffing of the internal quality assurance units at both public and private higher education institutions. It was indicated that, at certain public and private higher education institutions, individuals are directly appointed to serve in quality assurance positions instead of being recruited through a merit-based open competition, albeit institutions are increasingly correcting these arrangements. At public institutions, it was reported that individuals who occupy these positions often tend to be those who ‘aspire to be promoted to higher administrative positions such as deanship and vice presidency levels’ (HAUT3, 03.10.2018) rather than those who have the relevant educational background and experience that would be useful for fulfilling the quality assurance responsibilities. Usually, the appointment of personnel to leadership positions in the internal quality assurance structures of public institutions (unlike private institutions)

may involve 'political affiliation or ethnic background and other considerations rather than an assessment of their experience, qualification and competence relevant to quality assurance' (HAUT1, 03.10.2018). Similarly, the appointment of personnel to internal quality assurance positions at certain private higher education institutions can be based on additional questionable grounds. A respondent at HERQA reflected on his observation regarding such issues:

In private institutions, I have seen that some of the owners assign their own relatives and friends to positions at internal quality assurance units, who can look after the best business interests of the owner in the daily operations. This is a joke. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

The task of staffing internal quality assurance units at public and private higher education institutions can be further complicated by other issues. At public higher education institutions, positions within the internal quality assurance units come with extra payment and certain benefits, particularly when quality assurance is not a full-time responsibility. The positions associated with quality assurance directorship are also often influential because, in many institutions, they are directly under the administration of the institution's presidents or other similarly high-level institutional management bodies. As a result, respondents argue that an appointment to these positions can often create tension and conflict among the candidates and the outgoing and incoming staff. For example, a quality audit expert from HERQA shared the following incident during a focus group discussion, which addresses such tension:

I remember a case from one public university where a newly appointed director of quality assurance office had the difficulty of figuring out from where to begin his work because the previous director whom he replace was unhappy for being removed from the position and, because of that, had deleted all documents, guidelines and tools developed during his time in office and handed over an empty computer. This forced the new director and, in essence, the entire quality assurance office, to start from scratch. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

8.2.5 Training and capacity-building for staff of internal quality assurance units

The findings of the data analysis showed that almost all the respondents across the various target groups included in the sample, such as those from HERQA, the selected case higher education institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers and experts of quality assurance, agree that the

staff of the internal quality assurance units in the majority of the public and private higher education institutions lack sufficient knowledge of the theoretical foundations of quality and quality assurance, experience with developing and implementing quality assurance procedures and the understanding of how quality assurance issues fit within the broader academic and governance aspects of higher education institutions. No meaningful difference was found among the opinions of the respondents regarding the shortage of trained quality assurance officers and mechanisms for delivering continuous training.

HERQA has remained the primary source from which the staff of internal quality assurance units have received some form of training on the topic of quality and quality assurance. The review of the strategic objectives that HERQA has planned to accomplish as a part of the Growth and Transformation Plan II (GTP-II) shows that the agency aims to strengthen the knowledge and skills of the practitioners of quality assurance by providing short on-the-job training to its own experts, training selected academics from higher education institutions as and experts from professional associations who serve on evaluation committees and peer review panels during the external quality evaluations of higher education institutions (HERQA, 2015). The analysis of the data identified that HERQA seems to have two main goals for the training it provides. The first is to provide orientation to and improve the understanding of the academics who are selected from the higher education institutions to serve as peer reviewers in external quality audits and as external experts during the accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations carried out by HERQA. It was reported during the focus group discussion that HERQA claims to have thus far trained a few hundred academics from various higher education institutions (except fourth-generation public universities) as external auditors and has issued certificates to them. The other goal is for the trainees to be able to support the development of quality assurance at their home institutions upon returning from participating in external quality evaluations. The respondents stated that HERQA advises higher education institutions to assign these trained academics to positions of leadership in their internal quality assurance units based on the rationale that their knowledge and experience could be useful for stimulating quality assurance. However, the data show that this rarely occurs. For example, only Mekelle University, from the six case higher education institutions included in the study sample, has entrusted the leadership of its internal quality assurance unit to an individual who was trained by HERQA and who has repeatedly served in peer review panels during external quality evaluations.

The data showed no considerable difference between public and private higher education institutions with regard to the scarcity of training and capacity-building of the staff of internal quality assurance units. Many respondents highlighted the increasing need of higher education institutions to receive trainings on quality assurance as well as the acute shortage of human resources at HERQA to adequately satisfy these needs. Moreover, the respondents from HERQA also remarked that, given the capacity limitations at the agency, they prioritise higher education institutions who take the initiative and invite HERQA to provide specific training to their staff on quality assurance issues.

8.2.6 Examining the perceived differences in institutional capacity across institutional status

As discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework of the study, the consideration of capacity as a dimension of trust could be supported by assessing whether quality assurance agencies regard attributes, such as the size and age (e.g. senior, young, newly established institutions), legal status (e.g. public, private) and institutional status (e.g. universities, university colleges, colleges), of the higher education institutions as indicators of the perceived level of institutional capacity for internal quality assurance. The analysis of the data gathered from the relevant documents, focus group discussions and interviews suggests that HERQA does not consider institutional size and age and institutional status as significant indicators of the perceived differences in the levels of the capacity possessed by a higher education institution for quality assurance and, subsequently, as signals of the potential differences with respect to institutional performance in quality assurance. Instead, the evidence suggests that the respondents from HERQA tend to assess the perceived institutional capacity from the perspective of minimum quality standards. The respondents argue that the differences in the overall institutional capacity that falls below the minimum required quality standards are considered critical and have serious ramifications for whether the higher education institution passes the quality audit and receives accreditation and reaccreditation permits. In contrast, the respondents from HERQA tend to attach less importance to the differences in institutional capacity for higher education institutions that meet the minimum required standards. A respondent elaborated on this in the following way:

If we ask the question whether there is a difference in overall institutional capacity between higher education institutions found at different stages of development, the answer would be yes, significant differences do exist. There are differences in terms

of the level of the quality of the teaching staff, quality and number of books in the library, size and equipment in laboratories, quality of classroom and office and other elements of institutional capacity. However, when it comes to quality assurance such as accreditation, institutions found at different levels of overall capacity may be granted accreditation permits so long as they meet the minimum quality standards. But these institutions of different overall Institutional capacity are equal and the same when it comes to meeting the minimum quality standards. If the differences in overall institutional capacity fall below the minimum quality standard, then no institution will be granted accreditation permit in any programme. There are differences across institutions in terms of institutional capacity which is beyond that minimum standard. For example, all private institutions intending to provide programmes at bachelor level are required to have a permanent staff of at least 2 teachers with master's degree qualification and 1 teacher with a bachelor qualification in the field under question, but some institutions may have 4 or 5 teachers with Master's degree qualifications. (HACC1, 04.10.2018)

Another respondent at HERQA added:

We have never thought about looking at institutional diversity as indicators of how good higher education institutions are doing in quality assurance. It's difficult to take institutional capacity and seniority as a key indicator of relative performance in quality assurance. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

Despite this, the focus group discussion showed that HERQA had, under the direction of the Ministry of Education, carried out an evaluation that sought to organise private higher education institutions into categories based on their quality status and performance in internal quality assurance. The categorisation resembled a form of ranking according to institutional quality and capacity, but it was carried out only for the higher education institutions in the private sector. This may reflect the prevalent perception held by the Ministry of Education and HERQA that public higher education institutions, compared to their private counterparts, have better resources and quality and pose lesser concerns for quality. This partly explains the justification behind implementing the categorisation only on private higher education institutions. Another rationale could be the perceived need to regulate and keep tabs on private higher education institutions. In the following excerpt taken from a focus group discussion with the team of accreditation experts at HERQA, a respondent described the nature of the categorisation as follows:

In 2011, HERQA had started grouping institutions according to categories of 'A', 'B' and 'C' grades, which were supposed to be partly indicators of overall institutional capacity. The directive came from the Ministry of Education and we worked on its implementation. We developed indicators with a measure of 100 points for each category. It was decided later that institutions scoring point above 75 would be categorised under 'A', those above 50 in category 'B', and those below 50 to be

grouped in category 'C'. It was kind of a ranking system. The idea was that institutions categorised in 'A' group would be considered to be good institutions who can continue with their operations and would be assumed to be accredited and licensed. Institutions grouped in category 'B' would be given sets of recommendations and advice for improvement and they could continue with their operations. The list of institutions in category 'A' and 'B' would be announced to the public through mass media as institutions who have met at least average institutional capacity requirements and progressed with implementation of internal quality assurance. However, institutions in category 'C' would be considered as being below the average, and it was proposed that their list would be announced to the public and their operations would be suspended, and their programmes would be closed. We carried out the evaluations of institutions in a manner consistent with sudden inspections and visits with very short notice. But higher education institutions did not respond much differently to this, compared to the agency's already familiar sudden inspections. This may have been because they were not informed about the true purpose of the evaluations. (HACC2, 04.10.2018)

However, the respondents stated that, once HERQA conducted the evaluations and grouped the institutions into the three categories, the list of the higher education institutions was sent to the Ministry of Education, but the whole endeavour was abandoned, and the list was never released to the public. It was reported that this led to confusion among HERQA's staff since the Ministry provided little explanation regarding why the categorisation was needed and why it was later discarded. The respondents expressed their suspicions that it may have had to do with the Ministry's perceived political implications of the categorisation.

The teams of quality audit and accreditation experts from HERQA who participated in the focus group discussion sessions argued that the status and development of internal quality assurance can depend more on the level of commitment that higher education institutions accord to assuring and enhancing the quality of their education, research and community service rather than on the perceived levels of institutional capacities. The data show that the respondents maintained that the allocation of the resources necessary for internal quality assurance rarely depends on whether the institution is large or small. They emphasised instead that the utilisation of resources for quality assurance purposes requires institutional commitment and dedication. A respondent fittingly summarised this perspective:

What makes a difference is the level of institutional commitment and sense of ownership for quality assurance activities. Quality is not a matter of capacity, instead it is more of a matter of concern and commitment. Quality is very costly. When I say this, I don't mean to refer to financial cost; I am instead talking about the dedication it requires higher education institutions. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

Another respondent further reiterated the importance of institutional commitment to quality assurance perhaps more than the sheer size of higher education institutions and their levels of overall capacity.

In fact, if there is a genuine concern for quality, I think it is smaller institutions that can be more convenient and advantageous for effectively implementing quality assurance with less resources, also due to their less complexity. We have seen instances where bigger institutions with more resources performed less in implementing quality assurance than smaller and less resourceful institutions, irrespective of the public-private divide. There are some small colleges who are taking quality assurance very seriously. We have also observed bigger institutions with good quality assurance systems. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

The data analysis further indicated that the support of institutional management can play a key role in the development of internal quality assurance. In fact, the analysis identified that respondents perceive the support of institutional management in two ways. First, the support from a dedicated institutional management can enable internal quality assurance units to function with more independence and empowerment. Second, the institutional management can facilitate the allocation of the resources required for the activities of the internal quality assurance units, such as budget, staff, materials and administrative support.

Further, respondents noted that the development of internal quality assurance in the context of Ethiopian higher education is also currently a matter of individual commitment rather than institutional arrangement. Drawing on years of experience in conducting external quality evaluations in higher education institutions, the respondents from HERQA claimed that well-informed, competent and committed individuals can make a significant difference to the quality assurance performance of institutions. Some further elevated the role of individual-level commitment by arguing that the dedication of the directors of internal quality assurance units can determine the status and development of quality assurance at higher education institutions.

The findings from the data analysis seem to further strengthen the argument that neither a strong overall institutional capacity nor sufficient resources can guarantee that a higher education institution provides quality education, research and community services. Furthermore, these also do not suggest that the internal quality assurance practices of the institution are well-developed, functional and integrated into its everyday operations or that the institution has adequate performance in terms of the implementation of internal quality assurance. This implies that commitment is as important, if not more, as institutional capacity and resources. The levels of

commitment and dedication to quality can determine the actual level of resources a higher education institution allocates to its internal quality assurance efforts

In contrast to the institutional size, age and status, the data clearly suggest that the respondents from HERQA tend to consider the legal status of higher education institutions—that is, whether the higher education institution is public or private—as a significant indicator of the perceived level of the overall institutional capacity in terms of quality and quality assurance and the amount of concern they pose for quality. As discussed previously, the respondents from HERQA seem to believe that public higher education institutions are relatively resourceful and more capable of assuring the quality of the services they provide to society and of committing the required resources to internal quality assurance efforts than most private higher education institutions, which tend to be seen from a more critical perspective. The respondents from HERQA share the opinion that most private higher education institutions have capacity limitations and are challenged by the pressures associated with having a profit orientation when attempting to allocate adequate resources to internal quality assurance.

On balance, the respondents recognise that not all public higher education institutions have a robust institutional capacity nor do all private higher education institutions lack the adequate capacity and resources for providing quality education and properly implementing internal quality assurance. They argue that all public higher education institutions are not the same, and neither are all private higher education institutions. Instead, they acknowledge that there are some institutions that deviate both positively and negatively from the general trend. A respondent gave an example that shows this:

When we go to public institutions for audits, we have seen some programmes, mostly in engineering and technology fields, that fall short of minimum quality standards such as in their academic staff and don't even have laboratories and libraries, and otherwise would have been shut down if they were offered by private institutions. (HAUT4, 03.10.2018)

Another respondent reflected on an observation that suggests the presence of exceptional private institutions which seem to be gaining the recognition of HERQA for their level of commitment to quality and provision of the available resources and support to their internal quality efforts:

In the positive side, I have also seen private institutions such as Admas University and St. Mary's University that have taken quality assurance very seriously and invested a lot in strengthening their internal quality assurance systems and succeeded in

improving the quality and attractiveness of their programmes. Such institutions have managed to attract an increasing number of students. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

8.2.7 Analysis of the overall institutional capacity at the case higher education institutions

In the section below, the analysis of the overall institutional capacity of the case higher education institutions included in this study is presented. This is expected to provide more evidence that supports and challenges the results of the analysis of the institutional capacity for quality and quality assurance at higher education institutions from the perspective of the respondents from HERQA.

Mekelle University: Better organisation and structure but inadequate resources

Internal structure and organisation for quality assurance. Mekelle University is currently in the process of implementing a restructuring of its internal quality assurance, which was initiated in 2016 and approved by its board. The analysis of the interview data identified that the restructuring was driven by four main rationales. First, the respondents described that there was a need to separate quality assurance from routine administrative activities and organise it as an independent process. The university needs to abandon its previous approach of integrating academic administration and quality assurance activities, especially at college and lower levels. The second rationale was to stimulate and provide sufficient attention to quality assurance activities. It was reported that the previous structure had four offices under it, namely strategic leadership, quality assurance, information management and capacity building. The structure was criticised for its tendency to dedicate most of its efforts to institutional transformation activities, including introducing management reform tools such as Balanced Score Card (BSC), 'Citizen's Charter' service standard and Kaizen. The respondents stated that the high workload associated with such tasks meant that not enough was being done on the quality assurance front. Third, the previous structure was not convenient for cascading the structure of quality assurance to colleges and departments. The fourth rationale suggests that the university began working on a new structure for quality assurance against the backdrop of the pressure exerted from the Ministry of Education for having better internal quality assurance efforts at higher education institutions in

order to rescue the falling quality in higher education. These internal review and restructuring efforts indicate the university's internal motive to address the previous dissatisfaction and lack of tangible engagement in internal quality assurance.

Currently, Mekelle University has a quality assurance system with a structure that extends from a central coordination unit to all the departments. At the central level, there is a separate quality assurance office that is accountable to an 'Institutional Transformation and Quality Assurance Directorate', which, in turn, is accountable to the university's president. It has a mandate to monitor and follow up with various units of the university. It coordinates and monitors the quality assurance activities of all colleges. The office prepares instruments, tools and guidelines for carrying out quality assessment. At the college level, the structure has coordinators of quality assurance for each college. The respondents argued that the establishment of quality assurance structures at the college level was intended to monitor the quality of departments. Moreover, focal persons for quality assurance have been assigned at the department level. In the past, the responsibility for quality assurance in departments was to be fulfilled by the department heads, who often have heavy workloads, which subsequently limited the time they dedicated to quality issues. The central quality assurance unit assesses the performance of colleges with regard to quality assurance and the activities of each college-level quality assurance coordinator, who, in turn, assesses the performance of the departments and their focal persons. The review of the documents shows that the duties and responsibilities for quality assurance at various levels are specified in the university's key documents, such as the quality assurance policy and senate legislations.

Despite the existing structure, the interview data suggest that it is barely functional at the department level, where quality assurance procedures are expected to be implemented by the front-line academics and students and coordinated by department-level focal persons for quality assurance. The existing quality assurance structure is more functional with respect to its central coordination unit and college-level coordinators for quality assurance but were found to be less active at the grassroots level. This may be linked to the fact that the quality assurance structure was extended to the department level only recently, which is in contrast to the years of prior experience the university has with managing a central quality assurance office and college-level designated coordinators prior to the restructuring. Another factor for this was reported as the commitment issues that are associated with the lack of financial incentives. During an interview, a respondent explained this issue in the following way:

The department focal persons do not receive additional payment for their position which, beyond being a source of complaints, has created commitment problems for the implementation of quality assurance at lower levels. They raise issues of fairness as the head of the quality assurance office and college level coordinators are compensated for discharging responsibilities additional to their regular academic and administrative duties. (MKC2, 24.09.2018)

The restructuring work was being conducted during the time of data collection, and the quality assurance office had attempted to raise the awareness of the university community but had not assessed the effectiveness of the new structure. A respondent expressed, ‘Honestly speaking, I don’t think even half of these specifications are properly implemented’ (MKC2, 24.09.2018). The data from the interviews and documents indicate that the university has a long way to go before it manages to implement most of the activities designed as a part of restructuring the internal quality assurance office. Another respondent stated, ‘We are yet to practically implement most of our planned activities’ (MKM1, 24.09.2018). Moreover, the engagement of the entire internal quality assurance structure tends to currently focus almost entirely on monitoring the relevance and quality of the teaching and learning processes despite having the mandate to assure the quality of the university’s research and community service activities.

Human resources. Respondents agreed that the internal quality assurance office of the university has adequate human resources, partly as it has a decentralised internal quality assurance structure where the structure and responsibilities cascade to the college and department levels. It was reported that the focal people for quality assurance at the college and department levels seek technical guidance from the central coordination office for quality assurance. They receive administrative assistance and operational guidance from their respective college deans and department heads.

The review of Mekelle University’s quality assurance policy indicates that quality assurance is not a full-time responsibility for any of the staff of the university’s internal quality assurance structure. As stipulated by the university’s senate legislation, the maximum workload of the academic staff members is 12 hours per week (Mekelle University, 2017). Out of these 12 hours, the head of the quality assurance office is required to devote 75 per cent (or nine hours) of their time and energy to quality assurance responsibilities, whereas the college-level quality assurance coordinators are expected to dedicate 50 per cent. Finally, the department-level focal persons are to allocate 25 per cent of their time to their quality assurance responsibilities. The remaining hours are dedicated to regular teaching and research related activities (QAO, 2018). It was reported that the number of hours allocated

to quality assurance was not sufficient to properly carry out quality assurance responsibilities. A respondent stated:

When I applied for the position of a quality assurance coordinator of our college, I proposed a plan in my letter of motivation to monitor quality assurance processes in opening new programmes such as conducting needs assessment, curricula approval etc. My other plan was to audit the engagement of departments in quality assurance. But honestly, I believe I have mainly accomplished the first one, but the other was difficult since I didn't have enough time because I only have 6 hours per week for quality assurance. Most of this time went to supporting the college dean and contributing to the preparation of our college periodic evaluation reports. (MKC2, 24.09.2018)

The staff members of the quality assurance office are primarily teachers before being quality assurance officers or experts. The respondents stated that they have often worked more hours than those specified by the quality assurance policy and complain about the lack of sufficient financial incentives and benefits.

Recruitment and training. The recruitment of the director for the entire internal quality assurance office and the college-level coordinators of quality assurance is done considering relevant experience, skills and motivation. The review of the senate legislation indicates that the recruitment criteria focus on leadership and management experience, academic administration capacity, understanding of national and international trends in higher education and teamwork experience (Mekelle University, 2017). Additionally, the interview data showed that having a relevant educational background, such as degrees in education, pedagogy and others related to quality assurance, is given importance. The respondents also conveyed that applicants are required to submit a one-page letter of intent as well, which outlines the steps they plan to take, specifies the expected outcomes and describes the aspects that they aim to change, improve and transform. The appointment is carried out through open competition following a publicly announced vacancy.

The interview data suggest that the training provided to the staff of the quality assurance office is inadequate and not systematic. The office has organised two short trainings on quality assurance mechanisms in higher education, which are delivered by the experts invited from HERQA and other higher education institutions to coordinators of quality assurance from the college and department levels and department heads. Internally, the director of the quality assurance office has provided the orientation for the responsibilities associated with quality assurance to the department focal persons and college quality assurance coordinators. The respondents stated that the training covered topics such as what quality is and how it can be assured, how an audit is carried out, how documents on quality assurance

are prepared and other issues. The interviews revealed a lack of sufficient and continuous training opportunities for equipping the staff with the knowledge essential for effectively carrying out their responsibilities. One of the respondents also expressed criticism that certain staff members failed to attend the training due to a 'lack of commitment and because they know that they will not receive extra payment for it and because they consider quality assurance as a free service' (MKC2, 24.09.2018). This creates a challenge for the implementation of quality assurance at the grassroots level because the 'teaching staff at lower levels have little understanding about quality and quality assurance and some of them lack interest too' (MKC2, 24.09.2018) and they need the support and guidance of the quality assurance staff.

Quality assurance tools. The internal quality assurance office at Mekelle University utilises a number of sufficient national and institutional guidelines. The staff mainly rely on the quality standards developed by HERQA regarding 10 focus areas and other guidelines and manuals that direct various aspects of institutional functions. The respondents indicated that the internal quality assurance office has also developed additional tools to support its activities, such an institutional quality assurance policy and several forms and checklists.

The review of the quality assurance policy shows that the document describes the university's rationales, aims, guiding principles and orientation with respect to quality assurance, specifies the internal quality assurance structure and the respective responsibilities and stipulates the quality standards for each focus area of quality assurance (QAO, 2018). The respondents argued that the quality assurance office nevertheless expects each college to develop detailed guidelines in a way that fits the college's specific context. Further elaborating on this, a respondent added:

We don't expect an identical implementation of quality assurance, for example, at the colleges of medicine and social sciences, since each may focus on specific areas or benchmark different institutions as a reference. What we can expect is to have a common set of generic principles for quality assurance at institutional level. (MKM1, 24.09.2018)

Meanwhile, respondents also highlighted the challenges associated with ensuring compatibility between the tools some colleges have developed and the standards prescribed by HERQA. Such issues are linked to the varying degrees of relevance and applicability of the uniform quality standards developed by HERQA across various colleges that consist of several programmes with diverse disciplinary traditions.

Financial and material resources. Respondents shared the view that the financial and material resources allocated to the quality assurance office and overall internal quality assurance efforts are inadequate and need to be increased. The interview data and review of the relevant documents suggest that the university does not have a budget specifically allocated to the quality assurance office and the activities its structures coordinate at the college and department levels. The internal quality assurance structures at various levels submit their planned activities to the respective academic and administrative superiors, who then allocate the available resources based on the overall institutional capacity of the university.

The respondents claimed that constraints in terms of financial resources have prevented the internal quality assurance office from providing training to the staff and organising frequent discussion forums. The university allocates a small budget to quality assurance, which is often utilised to cover the overall administrative expenses needed for the operations of the office and does not reserve a specific amount for training. Moreover, the respondents mentioned constraints with regard to material resources, such as the lack of the availability of vehicles to facilitate the movement of the quality assurance staff between campuses located in different areas and an allowance for phone expenses for work-related activities. This suggests limitations in the support provided by the institutional leadership and management for the internal quality assurance activities. Additionally, the university-wide shortage of materials has created an obstacle to providing education that meets high quality standards. A respondent commented that:

Our department focal persons complain that it is difficult for them to assess the quality of programmes where key facilities such as laboratories, audio-visual equipment, libraries and conference rooms and others necessary for the operation of departments are not fulfilled. (MKC2, 24.09.2018)

Similarly, the previous institutional quality audit report of Mekelle University found that the fast growth of the university has put pressure on the adequacy of its facilities (HERQA, 2008).

Wollo University: Limited structure, resources and commitment

Organisation and internal structure for quality assurance. Wollo University has established a Quality Assurance and Relevance Directorate to coordinate, guide and implement its internal quality assurance efforts. The data show that this internal quality assurance office has a structure that extends to all the colleges and institutes of the

university operating in the Dessie and Kombolcha campuses. The office is directly accountable to the university's president which, respondents argued, provides it with more independence and helps reduce conflicts of interest when evaluating the academic activities managed under other vice presidents, such as academic affairs and research. The interviews indicated that the structure was developed based on the findings of an institutional review study.

The respondents suggested that the university's implementation of the internal structure for quality assurance has been inadequate due to various challenges. First, the limitations in support from the university management has delayed the appointment of two positions for experts who, according to the designed structure of the quality assurance directorate, would support the activities of the quality assurance director. Hence, the positions of a quality assurance team leader, who would prepare, review and assess the quality assurance activities of the college-level coordinators of quality assurance, and a quality assurance officer, who would provide technical expertise and guidance, are currently unoccupied. The respondents argued that this has prevented the internal quality assurance office from benefiting from professionals who possess expertise regarding issues related to quality and education. Second, Wollo University has been undergoing several management reforms and changes, which have taken time and occupied the human resources with activities such as those associated with the Balanced Score Card (BSC), Job Evaluation and Grading (JEG)¹¹⁰, Kaizen, Deliverology and Education Development Army (EDA). As the review of the report of the quality assurance indicates, ensuring the proper implementation of these change management tools has become one of the primary duties of the quality assurance office at the college-level. This takes time and resources away from activities that are more directly linked to quality assurance. It seems that the internal quality assurance structure of the university plays a key role in monitoring the institutional transformation initiatives that tend to concern administrative operations more than academic functions. The third challenge is that the ongoing JEG review study and the preparations for its implementation led to the staff of the quality assurance directorate experiencing a sense of instability and uncertainty regarding the security of their jobs, which has created an obstacle for

¹¹⁰ JEG is a recent job-related reform in public services that was introduced by the Ministry of Public Service and Human Resource Development and aims to standardise public service jobs through nation-wide cross-sectoral job evaluation and grading (Birara, 2017). It involves standardising job descriptions, job levels or grades, minimum education and experience requirements and pay scales. Moreover, the respondents from Wollo University and Woldia University seem to understand the essence of JEG as 'equal pay for equal jobs'. The reform is expected to put an end to the problem wherein civil servants working at similar positions and job levels or grades receive divergent salaries (Birara, 2017).

properly implementing internal quality assurance. The fourth challenge relates to the weak implementation of quality assurance at the grassroots level. The data analysis identified two possible explanations for this. The first is the inconsistencies and gaps between the level of commitment and the actual engagement with regard to quality assurance activities across all departments. The other explanation concerns the weak formal structure of quality assurance at the lower levels. For example, a respondent further elaborated this explanation:

The formal quality assurance structure stops at college and institute level coordinators. The structure at the moment only has weak informal presence at department levels which accentuates the need for at least formal ad hoc committees. But this is hardly implemented in line with our senate legislation stipulates because problems of insufficient commitment to quality assurance tend to get worse as we go lower in the structure of our university. We need to stimulate tangible commitment and dedication to quality at department and individual levels. (WLF1, 02.10.2018)

Moreover, the analysis of the documents and interview data suggests that the engagement of Wollo University in quality assurance tends to focus on teaching and learning. It has not addressed the issues related to its activities associated with research and community service despite its plans to assess the relevance of its research projects. The respondents also criticised the inadequate support internal quality assurance provides to improvements in institutional administration.

Human resources. The respondents from Wollo University argued that the internal quality assurance directorate has insufficient human resources, although the structure is designed to accommodate 13 staff members. In principle, the directorate was supposed to have a director, a quality assurance office, a team leader and a quality assurance coordinator for each of the eight colleges and the two institutes of the university. Not all these positions are staffed due to the limited support of the university management. The respondents argued that this has created a shortage of human resources. The following excerpt taken from an interview shows the extent of the problem:

I feel that the human resource we currently have is not enough. In our college, there are 12 departments and 26 programmes. We could do a better job if we have more coordinators at departments. This is because individual level commitment to quality assurance is not strong yet. This means that we have needed more people to get small tasks done. (WLY2, 02.10.2018)

Moreover, the data analysis found that quality assurance is not a full-time responsibility for all staff members of the quality relevance and assurance directorate. Out of the maximum 12-hours-per-week workload, for instance, the director is

expected to dedicate seven hours per week to quality assurance tasks, and coordinators of quality assurance at the college and institute levels are to allocate six hours per week. The remaining hours are supposed to be spent on teaching and research. This seems to increase their workload, which may affect the attention they give to their responsibilities towards quality assurance and the quality with which they are able to fulfil them.

Recruitment and training. The interview and document data indicate that the criteria used for recruiting, for example, the director of the quality relevance and assurance directorate seems to focus on management experience and seniority. This, intentionally or unintentionally, seems to disfavour the staff members who have more relevant educational backgrounds and research and practical experience to lead the university's internal quality assurance efforts. One of the respondents, who was within the leadership of the internal quality assurance unit when the data was being collected, expressed his thoughts that he saw himself as a devoted researcher in an unrelated field and openly conceded that he lacks the knowledge and experience needed to effectively oversee quality assurance activities and processes. He also shared that he had informed the university management about his wish to be reassigned to a different position. As a result, the university started the process of replacing him with a more appropriate professional. Such accounts show that the recruitment of the quality assurance staff through open competition has, in practice, contributed to the hiring of quality assurance coordinators who lack an educational background and experience related to education-related fields. It seems that the university has not considered this to be a challenge to the development of its internal quality assurance efforts.

Despite recruiting staff whose merit lacks the appropriate relevance to higher education and quality assurance, the interviews indicated that the director and coordinators of quality assurance at colleges and institutes have not received training regarding quality assurance. Interestingly, one of the objectives of the quality relevance and assurance directorate, as stipulated in the university's quality assurance policy, is to provide training on quality assurance for the university's community. Therefore, the fact that the quality assurance officers themselves have not received any training on issues related to quality assurance in higher education creates a gap. Thus, there is a lack of training and capacity-building mechanisms in the university. One of the respondents complained:

I have not received any training related to quality assurance in higher education after I have started working as a coordinator of college level quality assurance activities. If the college level coordinator of quality assurance is not trained, then who would train

the department level coordinators? We have little knowledge and understanding on how to do quality assurance. (WLY2, 02.10.2018)

Another respondent added the following:

There is no system that builds our capacity and knowledge for the responsibility we are required to discharge. What we have accomplished thus far is mainly a product of personal endeavour. Despite our repeated invitations, HERQA was not able to provide training to our quality assurance staff, except a one-day orientation we had at our university with the guest of HERQA on the basic ideas of quality assurance procedures implemented by HERQA. (WLF1, 02.10.2018)

The university does participate in the forum of Ethiopian public universities, which it has found useful for learning from other universities that have achieved greater success in terms of quality assurance. Regardless, the findings of the data analysis clearly showed that the quality assurance officers need support and follow ups to improve their capacity.

Quality assurance tools. The analysis of the institutional documents and interview data suggests that Wollo University has sufficient instruments, formats and checklists for the purpose of carrying out various types of quality assurance assessments. The university relies on the tools and standards developed by HERQA. It was reported that HERQA has published at least 81 checklists for conducting quality assurance. In some cases, it also revises these guidelines for internal use. The College of Medicine and Health Sciences particularly utilises the national accreditation and quality improvement standards developed through the partnership of HERQA and USAID for degree programmes for medicine, public health officers, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, anaesthesia, physiotherapy, medical laboratory science, medical radiology technology and environmental health science. The university also utilises the checklist employed by the Ministry of Education for supervising public universities. Certain guidelines were also adopted from other higher education institutions, such as the University of Gondar, which is a public university that is increasingly becoming successful in terms of internal quality assurance. Internally, the university uses several tools. Some of these tools that were reviewed by the researcher include senate legislation, academic regulations, institutional quality assurance structure and policy, student assessment policy, curriculum evaluation form, academic staff evaluation format, annual academic plan and reporting format, action plan for correcting identified gaps, team plan for Education Development Army (EDA) cooperative learning, continuous assessment implementation format, internal quality audit format, pre-evaluation preparation assessment checklist and other useful mechanisms.

The respondents highlighted the limitations of the university's capacity to implement the directives prescribed by HERQA and the available tools developed internally. Constraints in commitment and the sense of ownership partly account for the capacity issues. A respondent explained:

We have good policies and regulations, but our implementation capacity is very limited. Our quality assurance directorate only utilises less than half of available checklists prepared for assessing quality. (WLF1, 02.10.2018)

Moreover, the interview data suggest that the existence of weak communication and coordination among the staff members working on quality assurance, such as between the director and college-level coordinators of quality assurance.

Financial and material resources. The respondents stated that neither the quality relevance and assurance directorate nor its structure at the college and institute levels have specifically designated budgets. The funds are accessed from the overall budget that is reserved for all the nine directorates that are under the administration of the university's president. Some respondents appreciated that some college deans are supportive when the directorate requests for financial assistance to carry out necessary tasks. The directorate has also received additional financial support from international development partners, such as the International Training and Education Centre for Health (I-TECH). One respondent went further, saying, 'There has not been an instance where I requested for funds for quality assurance-related activities and failed to receive support from our college' (WLY2, 02.10.2018). Additionally, the quality assurance director and coordinators at the college and institute levels receive benefits in the form of moderate extra payment based on their designation and a generous phone allowance, and the position contributes 60 per cent credit for promotions to academic positions.

Despite the absence of a decentralised budget for quality assurance, the respondents argued that the budget support the directorate currently receives seems sufficient. In fact, they claimed that it is the quality assurance engagement that is lacking. A respondent pointed out that the quality assurance staff 'lacks focus and real commitment to properly carry out the responsibilities of quality assurance with the budget and resources currently available' (WLF1, 02.10.2018). The lack of a designated budget has been repeatedly cited as one of the challenges to organising trainings and symposiums.

As a result, internal quality assurance units struggle with inadequate material resources. There is a shortage of office space and access to reliable internet connections and vehicles for easily moving between different campuses for the

supervision work that the directorate conducts once in two weeks. The researcher observed that the quality assurance directorate has a small office for three individuals, namely the quality assurance director, the quality assurance officer and their secretary. The tables are placed next to each other in a way that hinders movement. Many files are stacked on the floor since the file cabinets are full. The office of the coordinator of quality assurance at the college of medicine and health sciences is visibly in a poor condition. The tables and chairs are broken, and the roof leaks when it rains. Some respondents thought that the limited office space was not intolerable, particularly when considering that about 70 per cent of the academic staff do not have an office. Computer and stationery resources are sufficiently available to the directorate, but frequent power outages represent another problem.

Moreover, the education facilities, equipment and resources are either not fulfilled or in need of major maintenance and renovation despite the fact that the university has been operational since 2007. The analysis of the interview data suggest that this can be partly because the infrastructure and facilities of Wollo University, as many second- and third-generation public universities, were built using a low-cost construction scheme through a partnership between the Ministry of Education and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). A review of the report of the previous institutional quality audit carried out by HERQA found that Wollo University has a weak system of resource management, maintenance and utilisation (HERQA, 2014b). Most of the aforementioned challenges, such as the deteriorating facilities and poor resource maintenance, shortage of office space, inadequate internet connections and other facilities, were also uncovered in the 2014 institutional audit. This suggests that the university has not carried out sufficient improvement work. The shortage of well-equipped facilities has affected the quality of the practical learning available to students. For example, a respondent commented:

Most of our laboratories are not furnished and have not yet become functional. Thus, we send our veterinary medicine and agriculture students to industries such as agro-industries located around the capital city area for practical learning. Students are forced to complete 6 to 7 practical courses in just one trip to such industries. It has been difficult to assurance whether these practical lessons have met the objectives and learning outcomes of the courses. I think this compromises the quality of education. However, medicine and health science programmes are in a relatively better condition since their students have good access to practical education in the nearby Dessie Hospital and Boru Hospital. (WLF1, 02.10.2018)

Woldia University: Inadequate structure, resources and training

Internal structure and organisation for quality assurance. Woldia University has established an internal structure and organisation, albeit inadequate, to facilitate the implementation of internal quality assurance. After the Job Evaluation and Grading (JEG) reform, the internal quality assurance office was renamed from the ‘academic quality assurance directorate’ to the ‘institutional quality assurance directorate’. It is currently directly accountable to the vice president for academic affairs. The directorate consists of a director, two supervision and quality enhancement experts and eight coordinators for its faculties. Each faculty has its own coordinator. This is argued to help the directorate evaluate and follow up with the implementation of the quality assurance and enhancement tools at the various faculties and departments (IQAD, 2017). The coordinators of quality assurance at the faculties are answerable to the director of the quality assurance directorate and the deans of their respective faculties. At the faculty level, the responsibility for coordinating quality assurance is integrated with the coordination of the research activities rather than carried out independently. Overall, the performance report of the directorate cites the establishment of quality assurance structures at the faculty and department levels and the commencement of their operation, particularly with respect to supporting supervision and audits, as a strength (IQAD, 2017). A member of the university’s senior management explained that the rationale behind this structure took into account the interests of the university regarding cutting costs and pushing for greater efficiency. The following excerpt taken from an interview elaborates this point:

The quality assurance directorate requested structures for coordinators to be created at faculty level if the implementation of quality assurance is to expand across the university. But our university did not assign a separate coordinator for quality assurance to avoid incurring more cost and since the existing coordinators did not have much workload. This was decided by the university senate. Therefore, the responsibility for quality assurance was integrated with the responsibility of staff who have already coordinate research and community services. (WD1, 01.10.2018)

All the respondents from the university saw the lack of an independent quality assurance structure at faculties as a challenge. They argued that this has created a weak sense of ownership and commitment for the faculty level coordinators with regard to quality assurance, since they tend to consider their duty of coordinating research as their primary responsibility. The current structure is also criticised for limiting the university’s capacity for implementing quality assurance procedures. The performance report of the directorate indicated that the faculty coordinators of

quality assurance have a high workload, and this has resulted in their slow responsiveness to the needs of the departments (IQAD, 2017). It was reported that these coordinators seem to 'resist the task of coordinating quality assurance work' (WS3, 01.10.2018). The interview data also indicated that some faculty-level coordinators have resigned from their positions because they refused to assume the additional responsibility of quality assurance. The current state of quality assurance at the faculty level can be explained by the fact that the practice of coordinating research in the faculties began before quality assurance. This shows that 'quality assurance is considered as an additional responsibility; one that does not stand on its own' (WB2, 01.10.2018). Another explanation offered by respondents, which was confirmed through a review of the documents, suggests that the internal quality assurance structures, activities and processes are not stipulated in the university's senate legislation. The analysis of the interview data shows that the respondents share the opinion that organising quality assurance as a separate structure and a full-time responsibility of the staff of the directorate could enhance internal quality assurance activities.

At the department level, the institutional quality assurance directorate has a structure that is represented by a committee comprising three members who focus on quality assurance, namely a chairperson, secretary and member. The respondents stated that these committees do not function properly because they believe that the responsibilities assigned to them are fundamentally the responsibilities of the faculty-level coordinators of quality assurance. These quality assurance committees do not exist and are not functional in all departments, and their existence seems to be more for the sake of formality.

Human resources. The analysis of the interview data and documents suggests that the university has not allocated the sufficient human resources that are necessary for stimulating, facilitating and implementing internal quality assurance. The respondents indicated that this has been a critical issue. Cognisant of such challenges, the directorate considers the task of organising its structure using sufficient human resources as one of its strategic objectives (IQAD, 2017). A member of the university's senior management stated that the number of staff members allocated to the directorate has increased, in the new structure implemented as a part of the JEG reform, from 3-11, excluding the department-level committees, albeit agreeing that it is insufficient. Another problem the university has, given the fact that it has only been in operation for a little less than a decade, is the shortage of properly qualified and experienced personnel. The respondents stated that about 64 per cent of the academic staff have bachelor's degrees, 35 per cent have master's degrees and

only 1 per cent have doctorates. Given such a vast challenge, one of the respondents commented:

It's futile to say that we can assure the quality of education with a staff of such poor qualification level and experience. For example, about half of our students are in Faculty of Technology but majority of teachers with only bachelor's qualification are in the same faculty. They transferred from graduating directly to teaching courses while their role should have been limited to assisting lecturers. (WD1, 01.10.2018)

Moreover, quality assurance is a full-time responsibility for the director of the institutional quality assurance directorate, which is unlike its counterparts at Mekelle University and Wollo University. The faculty coordinators of quality assurance are expected to dedicate six hours, out of the 12-hours-per-week maximum workload, to quality assurance responsibilities.

Recruitment and training. The positions in the institutional quality assurance directorate at Woldia University are staffed according to the requirements specified in the JEG directive introduced by the Ministry of Public Service and Human Resource Development. The respondents argued that this was done to satisfy the demands for qualified human resources with respect of the directorate. At the time of data collection, the university had started implementing the JEG directive, which intends to standardise the job ranks, descriptions, requirements and salaries of each position at a national level. The respondents also saw the purpose of the reform to be a nation-wide drive in civil service to ensure the implementation of 'equal pay for equal jobs'¹¹¹. The implementation of the reform has enabled the university to staff its institutional quality assurance directorate with personnel who fulfil the requirements specified for each position. For instance, a new director with a master's degree in the field of education was appointed and, as a result, the previous director, who only had bachelor's degree, was demoted to the position of a quality assurance expert.

Although standardised recruitment using JEG could offer significant benefits, the analysis of the interview data and relevant documents indicated that the personnel recruited to the institutional quality assurance directorate through such mechanisms lack sufficient training on the subject of quality and quality assurance in higher education. Such trainings are essential to equip them with the knowledge and

¹¹¹ The data gathered from the case higher education institutions showed that the individuals working in the position of directorship in the internal quality assurance units at different higher education institutions have dissimilar job designations, duties and responsibilities, job descriptions, number of hours allocated for quality assurance, qualifications and requirements, and salaries and benefit packages.

understanding that is crucial for properly discharging their responsibilities. The data revealed that the director and most of the quality assurance coordinators have received no orientation on how to assure and improve the quality of education, research and community service of a higher education institution. The performance report of the directorate identified that the failure to organise opportunities for short-term trainings to support the improvement of the performance of its staff was a key challenge to its operations (IQAD, 2017). The respondents maintained that this is critical, since most of the staff of the directorate are ordinary teachers with little prior knowledge and experience regarding issues concerning quality assurance in higher education. Although the staff members of the previous internal quality assurance structure had undergone some brief training, no such opportunities have been organised after the positions of quality assurance were revised and the staff shuffled as a part of the JEG implementation. These circumstances seem to have led to a situation where the quality assurance staff mainly rely on their individual knowledge and experience to perform their duties. This emphasises the fact that the staff members who are tasked with the responsibility of assuring and enhancing quality need to be given adequate training to help them effectively fulfil their responsibilities.

The respondents reiterated that the institutional quality assurance directorate has made some unsuccessful attempts at organising training opportunities and experience-sharing visits to other higher education institutions mainly due to limited support from the university's management. A review of the performance report of the directorate confirmed this criticism. The report indicated that the university management lacked the will and commitment to grant permission and provide the financial and material resources needed to implement the proposals put forth by the directorate to organise such trainings and experience-sharing visits to facilitate the capacity-building of its staff (IQAD, 2017). Regardless, the directorate has continued to include such requests in its annual plan.

The interviews indicated that Woldia University has created an institutional capacity-building unit to provide, organise and facilitate demand-driven short-term training to its academic, administrative and technical support staff. Thus far, the unit has organised trainings on transformational leadership for high- and mid-level academic leaders, provided short pedagogical orientation for new academic staff members and facilitated the long-term training of the academic staff at the master's and doctorate levels. The respondents criticised the reliance on external experts for training and the lack of internal expertise, which was argued to have hindered the development of continuous training mechanisms. The review of the documents

found that no training and orientation have been organised by the institutional capacity-building unit with regard to issues that are more directly related to quality and quality assurance in higher education.

Quality assurance tools. Although the interviews suggested that the university has the adequate tools, instruments and formats that are crucial to assess the quality of the teaching and learning processes, the review of the documents suggests that there are insufficient institutional guidelines, regulations and manuals. The university still primarily utilises the standards and tools of quality assurance developed by HERQA with respect to 10 focus areas. The institutional quality assurance directorate conducts internal quality assessments using these tools and guidelines. This seems to be the starting point for facilitating internal quality assurance activities. Thus far, no programme has been shut down for being found by the directorate to have critical quality gaps despite the directorate's authority to do so. The respondents claimed that programmes are subjected to proper evaluation and approval before they are initiated, but no appropriate data could be found regarding the implementation capacity of the university to practically employ these tools to identify its strengths and weaknesses and formulate plans for improving those areas of operation that require development.

Financial and material resources. The data seem to present mixed evidence regarding the extent to which the essential financial and material resources are provided for the internal quality assurance efforts. Contrary to the views of the respondents working in the institutional quality assurance directorate, a respondent who is a member of the university's senior management maintained that the university management provides the necessary financial resources requested by the directorate with little hesitation. The respondent further claimed that the university management has financed the experience-sharing visits requested by the directorate and covered expenses for the workshops the directorate organises. However, the respondents from the directorate stated that such support was lacking. The researcher further reviewed the relevant institutional documents in search of additional evidence regarding this issue. Accordingly, the performance report of the directorate supports the claim made by two respondents that one of the main obstacles the directorate has encountered with respect to the capacity-building of its staff is the lack of financial and material support from the university's management (IQAD, 2017). The report also cited that the repeated requests of the directorate for office materials to be purchased and fulfilled were not addressed by the management. Interestingly, it was stated that the report was submitted to the university's management. This suggests that more evidence was found to support the criticism of the commitment

and support of the management. On the other hand, the researcher could not find additional evidence that substantiated the claim made by the respondent from the university's senior management. Nevertheless, the directorate continues to rely on the support of the university management, since there is no designated funding for quality assurance and the power to authorise and make decisions regarding financial issues rests in the hands of the university's vice president, who is responsible for managing academic affairs. A respondent leading the institutional quality assurance activities of Woldia University explained the importance of financial, material and overall support of management as follows:

The task of assuring and enhancing the quality of higher education is a broad and complex task which requires undertaking various activities which requires sufficient financial and material resources to be at its disposal. But there is no budget specifically allocated to the institutional quality assurance directorate. The lack of budget is restricting our activities. It has been common to hear government and higher education institutions reassuring their commitment to quality, but this rhetoric has not been shown in concrete engagements, for example, by providing specifically earmarked funding for quality assurance activities. In reality, quality is not a priority. (WB2, 01.10.2018)

Moreover, the material resources provided for the institutional quality assurance efforts were reported to be insufficient. As in the cases of Mekelle University and Wollo University, the institutional quality assurance directorate experiences a shortage of office space and materials. The researcher observed a familiar sight of several staff members sharing a small office that is partly filled with documents that are stacked on the floor.

This evidently illustrates significant a shortage of necessary inputs and resources. Additionally, the scarcity of the resources and facilities required for properly conducting teaching and learning processes is also identified in various institutional documents as a formidable challenge that the university is facing. The facilities of the university that are essential to the practical learning of students, such as laboratory equipment were still being fulfilled at the time of data collection. This implies that 'some new public universities started operations without obtaining the necessary facilitates in advance' (WD1, 01.10.2018). The respondents stated that students could not attend practical learning sessions on campus and, hence, until recently, had to be sent to other universities that had better facilities. A common challenge associated with such an approach was cited to be the adverse impact it has on the quality of education, since courses that involve practical learning, which should be delivered for a semester, are completed within a few days to minimise costs. The data suggest that the shortage of facilities and material resources could be

more critical in fields where practical learning constitutes an integral component. For instance, a respondent at the Faculty of Technology commented:

We have acute limitation of resources and facilities desperately needed by our departments for effectively carrying out their teaching and learning responsibilities. This is very crucial for us since our programmes require intensive practical learning. We frequently receive requests from departments regarding the purchasing of equipment and facilities related to practical learning, but we have limited capacity to fulfil such requests that are linked to budget issues. (WS3, 01.10.2018)

Admas University: Empowered and resourceful internal quality assurance

Internal structure and organisation for quality assurance. The analysis of the data gathered from the interviews and a review of documents found that Admas University has an internally driven, adequate, comprehensive and empowered internal structure and organisation for assuring and enhancing the quality of the education, research and community services it provides to its stakeholders. The university has established a quality assurance office that has structures both centrally at the university's head office and at its branch campuses. The structure of the central quality assurance office consists of two wings, namely the audit wing and the system and documentation wing. The quality assurance officers working at branch campuses are directly accountable to the dean of their respective campus and are answerable to the central quality assurance office. The respondents argued that quality assurance was needed at each branch campus because the central quality assurance office cannot equally address all branches, including those located in cities that are far away from the capital city and those in neighbouring countries. The university has also established department-level quality assurance committees that serve as the starting point for the implementation of quality assurance. The structure of the quality assurance office seems comprehensive, since it extends from the headquarters of the university to all branch campuses and departments.

According to the data, an interesting aspect of the internal structure and organisations for quality assurance at Admas University, unlike the rest of the higher education institutions included in this study, is that the quality assurance office is administered under its own vice presidency. The analysis of the interview data identified two main motivations behind Admas University implementing this type of structure for internal quality assurance. The first reason seems to be related to the growing understanding of Admas University that the scope of quality assurance extends beyond teaching and learning activities and that having the quality assurance

office governed by a separate vice presidency enables the assurance of the quality of the other core operations of the university as well. This was argued to have led to a realisation that the responsibilities associated with quality assurance need to be addressed as a separate task instead of being merged with the duties related to research and business development as was done previously. The respondents argued that this indicates the degree of importance the university has attached to its internal quality assurance efforts. As such, research and business development have also begun to be seen as broad activities on their own. Meanwhile, the awareness about the scope, complexity and urgency of the quality challenges in higher education has gradually expanded at the national level. The data showed that the other motivation for implementing this structure was the desire to empower and render the quality assurance office more independent by making it directly accountable to the university's president rather than the academic vice president or other units. This was assumed to make the quality assurance office more decisive, powerful and impactful with regard to assuring the quality of the activities of all the core operations of the university. The review of the institutional documents suggests that the office has a mandate to oversee the quality of all the core operations of the university and take action against any unit regarding quality matters. In the following excerpt from an interview, a respondent recounted the intentions of the university to empower the internal quality assurance office:

My letter of appointment to the leadership of quality assurance indicated that I have the power to take all necessary measures or demand other relevant bodies to take such measures against units of the university found with considerable quality irregularities. This is why I say our quality assurance office is powerful and independent. It is structurally positioned to oversee the activities of all other units and report to the president. (AB2, 08.10.2018)

Human resources. The data analysis found that Admas University has assigned its internal quality assurance office and internal quality assurance activities relatively better human resources and experts and to a relatively higher extent than the rest of the higher education institutions included in this study. The quality assurance office has adequate human resources. The vice president, director and vice director of the quality assurance office monitor the administrative aspects of quality assurance, whereas the actual quality assurance work is carried out by the quality assurance experts, documentation experts and quality assurance officers at every branch campus and quality assurance committees at the department level. Moreover, the analysis of the data also suggested that the responsibility for quality assurance primarily belongs to at each individual unit. The design of the internal quality

assurance system showed that the elements related to quality are implicitly and explicitly addressed in most job descriptions. This requires everyone in the university to take quality standards and requirements into account in their everyday workflow. This practice was argued to help with engaging adequate human resources during internal quality assurance and enhancement activities.

Admas University has, by far, more full-time quality assurance officers than any of the other higher education institutions covered in this study. Except for the members of the department-level quality assurance committees, all quality assurance staff, including the director, vice director, quality assurance and documentation experts and quality assurance officers of each branch campus work full-time on quality assurance. This indicates an exceptional commitment to quality assurance, one that is not even observed in any of the public higher education institutions that have more resources at their disposal. Most public higher education institutions have internal quality assurance units that are operated by staff members who are required to allocate either 75, 50 or 25 per cent of their working hours, out of their maximum 12-hours-per-week workload, to quality assurance work. In certain public higher education institutions, such as Woldia University, only the director of the internal quality assurance unit works full-time on quality assurance, while the rest of the unit's members are primarily academic staff who, as an additional responsibility, support internal quality assurance activities.

Recruitment and training. The recruitment of quality assurance staff at Admas University takes into consideration the relevance of educational background and experience for assuring and enhancing quality assurance. The interviews suggested that most of the university's quality assurance officers and experts have an academic background in fields related to education and have experience with working and teaching in higher education institutions. However, not all the experts have academic qualifications that are strictly relevant to education and quality assurance given the challenge of finding qualified human resources in the labour market. The respondents stated that some of the quality assurance officers were recruited considering the experience they have accumulated in relation to education and quality assurance despite their academic background being of unrelated fields. For example, one of the quality assurance experts has doctorate degree and has extensive experience with teaching in universities and has previously worked as a quality assurance expert in another higher education institution. The data showed that quality assurance officers who had a doctorate degree were only found at Admas University, unlike the rest of the studied higher education institutions.

The quality assurance officers at Admas University seem to have received relatively better training than their counterparts from the other institutions included in this study. However, certain respondents indicated that the training provided are not adequate and greater capacity-building is needed. There is potential for making the capacity-building for the quality assurance staff more systematic and continuous. Thus far, the quality assurance staff has mainly undergone training and orientation for various issues related to quality assurance, which were organised internally by the senior experts from the quality assurance unit. On certain occasions, short training sessions were organised by HERQA and other international development partners, such as Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Quality assurance tools. The review of the institutional documents and interview data clearly showed that Admas University has an extensive, well-organised, standardised and effectively managed repertoire of quality assurance tools and documentation practices. Some of the quality assurance tools and documents reviewed by the researcher include the institutional legislations, strategic development plan, administration manual, campus supervision manual, quality assurance policy, strategy and guideline for quality assurance, curriculum design and review guideline, teaching-learning guideline, student assessment guideline, academic programming guideline, distance education manual, short-term training guideline, research and publication guideline and library and computer operation guidelines. Each of these guidelines has clear and consistent procedures, forms and formats. The data analysis suggested that these guidelines, procedures and forms are practically utilised by the university staff and quality assurance officers for assessing the quality of various aspects of the academic and administrative operations. Additionally, the quality assurance office uses manuals and documentations for each of the 10 focus areas identified by HERQA with regard to institutional quality audits. Accordingly, the quality assurance office monitors various academic and administrative aspects of the university such as vision, mission and goals, programme relevance and curriculum, student admission and progression, graduate links and competence assessment, infrastructure and learning resources, human resource requirement, research, community development, staff development, student support services, governance and management system, teaching-learning and internal quality assurance. The review of documents also identified that the university employs quarterly performance evaluation formats and self-evaluation criteria for the practice of grading the performance of its internal offices, colleges and campuses. In general, the implementation of internal quality assurance and the documentation practice of Admas University are seen by respondents from the university and HERQA mostly

as a key strength and good practice that other higher education institutions have attempted to use as a benchmark. However, the sheer volume of guidelines, forms and formats and extensiveness of the documentation practice could create confusion and an additional burden for the staff unless maintained at an optimal level.

Financial and material resources. According to the data generated from the interviews, the respondents argued that the university's internal quality assurance activities are sufficiently supported with financial and material resources. The data suggested that the quality assurance office was established mainly as a result of the internal motivation of Admas University to improve the quality and standards of its core activities rather than the requirements defined by the higher education proclamation (650/2009) and the directives of HERQA. Thus, the university's internal quality assurance activities receive better support from the management. The quality assurance office submits the activities it plans to undertake and requests the required resources, and the university management authorises the allocation of said resources. The university allocates a specifically designated budget, amounting to an 'annual average of 130,000 ETB'¹¹² (AF1, 05.10.2018), to its internal quality assurance office¹¹³. The respondents reported that the budget and additional support provided are adequate for undertaking internal quality assurance activities. This indicates the commitment of the institutional management to support quality assurance and enhancement efforts. A member of the senior management of the university elaborated that the institutional commitment and flexibility of operation has allowed the provision of the overall support to internal quality assurance in the following lines:

In our university, budget is not highly bureaucratized and rigidly regulated as in a public university, to a point that quality assurance units would have problem accessing available budget and other resources. We have flexibility in the way we manage our budget. The quality assurance unit receives enough financial support and has never had shortage of financial and material resources for the tasks it needed to carry out. I don't think that quality assurance is a matter of having or not having plenty of financial and materials resources. I think it's more of a result of institutional dedication to use the available resources to support the quality improvement of its operations. (AB2, 08.10.2018)

Moreover, the quality assurance office receives administrative support for publishing various newsletters, magazines and bulletins titled 'Admas Quality', 'Experience

¹¹² This is equal to approximately 4,740 USD at the time of data collection.

¹¹³ The reported amount of the specifically designated budget for internal quality assurance could not be confirmed using the institutional documents, as the researcher was unable to gain access to the financial documents of the university.

Admas', 'Horizon' and 'Finote Admas', which are used to communicate information about the operations of the university to its stakeholders and raise the awareness of the university community regarding various issues related to quality. The financial and material resources needed for the publications are provided by the relevant administrative units. The respondents claimed that no cancellation of publications was recorded due to insufficient funds.

Additionally, the data analysis found that the respondents share the view that material resources are sufficiently provided for internal quality assurance activities at this university. The central quality assurance office has five separate, spacious, tidy and properly maintained office rooms for its quality assurance staff. The researcher observed that no files were stacked on the floor and, instead, were properly organised in cabinets. The offices are overall in a better condition than the quality assurance offices of the other case higher education institutions. It was reported that each branch campus also has a quality assurance office. In addition, the quality assurance office staff has easy access to the university's vehicles without bureaucracy, unlike the public higher education institutions, for the purpose of moving between branch campuses for work-related activities. The data analysis suggested that the presence of the strong institutional commitment could be the main reason behind the fact that Admas University actually devotes a greater amount of resources to internal quality assurance activities despite having significantly fewer overall resources when compared to the public higher education institutions included in this study. A quality assurance officer from the university stated, 'I feel that our university has dedicated more than the resources it is expected and required to allocate to its quality assurance activities' (AF1, 05.10.2018). Similarly, the audit and accreditation experts from HERQA specifically commended Admas University, during the focus group discussion, as a responsible private higher education institution that takes quality seriously and allocates the necessary resources for internal activities aimed at assuring and enhancing quality.

Sheba University College: A single-person structure and considerably lacking resources

Internal structure and organisation for quality assurance. The analysis of the data found that Sheba University College has a weak internal structure and organisation with respect to quality assurance. It has a quality assurance office with a single staff member, who serves as the director and is accountable to the university's president, and it lacks a formal structure that extends to all departments and the four branch campuses of

the university college. There are no officers who coordinate quality assurance activities in all of these campuses. According to the respondents and the quality assurance policy, this was the case because Sheba University College believes that quality assurance can be achieved by teamwork, wherein the actual quality assurance work is expected to be undertaken through a collaboration between the director of quality assurance and the department heads and college deans (RQAO, 2014). On the contrary, a respondent who is a member of the senior management of Sheba University College claimed that there are two quality assurance facilitators at each faculty who check and follow up on teaching and learning processes, but this claim was not substantiated by any additional data. In fact, the interview with the quality assurance director of the university college and the review of relevant documents clearly showed that the formal structure of the quality assurance office starts and ends with the director of the office. The data gathered from the university college suggested the need for setting up a comprehensive quality assurance structure that has robust foundations at campus, faculty and department levels. This sort of structure and organisation are currently lacking. One of the respondents attributed this to a lack of resources, as illustrated in the following remark:

We are a private higher education institution. Don't expect us to have well-organised structures for quality assurance like those at public universities who are fully funded and supported by the resources of the government. (SH2, 26.09.2018)

Human resources, recruitment and training. The analysis of the data found that the human resources allocated by Sheba University College for its internal quality assurance efforts are considerably inadequate. Evidently, there is a shortage of quality assurance staff and human resources, since the internal quality assurance activities of the university college are mainly carried out by a single full-time director. There are no additional quality assurance officers who provide the sufficient support that is essential for ensuring quality in all study programmes and core activities of the institution. A respondent argued that the institution's challenges with human resources, both with quality assurance and teaching and learning activities, could be explained by the deficiencies in the commitment of the institutional management and the pressures created by a profit orientation:

I feel that our institution has a shortage of well-qualified and experienced academic staff. This is not because our institution lacks financial capacity, but it's more because of lack of commitment and willingness of the management of our institution to allocate necessary resources. Honestly speaking, our institution is not that much interested to hire good quality teaching staff. It seems to me that the reason behind this is the thinking that the more qualified an academic staff is, the more expensive it

would be for the institution to hire. We must not forget that our institution is a private institution and its board are the shareholders. In practice, cost minimisation and profit maximisation interests in one way or another affect whether our institution fulfils the necessary resources to ensure the provision of quality academic services to its customers and the public. Such business interests pose risk for safeguarding quality. (SG1, 25.09.2018)

Moreover, there is a lack of adequate and systematic training on quality assurance at Sheba University College. This is despite the recruitment criteria requiring a combination of a relevant master's degree, four years of experience with working in research activities at higher education institutions and two years of experience with management of quality assurance at higher education institutions. The data showed that the current quality assurance director did not fully meet these criteria, as the director has extensive experience with working at a regional education bureau on issues mainly related to primary and secondary education but only a year of experience with quality assurance at the higher education level. The quality assurance director, having served in the position for a year at the time of data collection, had received a three-hour orientation on the culture of Sheba University College and how to carry out quality assurance work from the outgoing director and a briefing by the academic vice president about what the university college expects from the internal quality assurance office. Aside from this, the director has not received any training specifically focused on quality and quality assurance in higher education. Moreover, HERQA has not provided any capacity-building training, other than the orientation it gave on how to carry out an internal quality audit to the team of academic staff members who were to prepare a self-evaluation report when Sheba University College underwent an institutional quality audit in 2011.

With regard to quality assurance tools, Sheba University College uses several forms and checklists to assess various aspects of its teaching and learning processes and support internal quality assurance activities. Some of the quality assurance tools that were reviewed by the researcher include a guiding quality assurance policy, academic rules and regulations, curriculum approval, course coverage follow up checklist, continuous assessment follow up checklist, course outline quality checklist and exams approval checklist. Some of these tools were being revised at the time of data collection.

Financial and material resources. There is no specifically designated budget for the internal quality assurance office. The quality assurance director needs to submit its planned activities and request the resources it needs for its activities, then the administrative and finance unit of the management of the university college approves or disapproves the request based on the availability of resources. In practice, the

institutional management makes the final decision related to finances. This is contradictory to the formal job description of the quality assurance director, which states that the director is to assume responsibility for managing budgets and allocating resources for quality assurance activities. The data suggested that the power of the quality assurance office is limited to submitting recommendations regarding the inputs and facilities that need to be fulfilled. It was indicated that the final decisions regarding quality assurance activities and the allocation of the budget and necessary resources and facilities for teaching and learning are taken by the owners, as Sheba University College is a private higher education institution. A respondent argued that the routine tasks of quality monitoring tend to be supported by the management, whereas the capacity-building activities that, for example, involve organising trainings on quality assurance for the staff receive less attention. It was reported that the management of the university college cite the lack of funds to decline the proposals for providing such training.

Despite the limited financial support, the respondents shared the view that the material resources Sheba University College provides to its quality assurance office are sufficient. The director has a spacious office, computer and other necessary stationery materials. The university college has its own spacious and convenient building facility from where it runs its programmes. It was reported that the classrooms, library and practical-learning workshops are in decent condition. The university college has obtained machinery and equipment as a development support from its international partner to facilitate practical learning in automotive, electronics, metal technology, construction programmes and other programmes. However, the resource management practices of the university college lack proper organisation and follow ups. For example, the difficulty with obtaining measurable evidence regarding the availability of adequate and appropriate human and physical resources was reported as one of the main challenges that the quality assurance office encountered, as indicated in the quarter report of the office (QAO, 2017c).

Medco Bio-Medical College: Absence of structure and resources

Internal structure and organisation for quality assurance. The analysis of the interview data found that Medco Bio-Medical College, at the time of data collection in October 2018, has no visible formal internal structure and organisation for guiding, overseeing and assuring the quality of education and other key operations. The college has hired a single staff member who is formally responsible for coordinating quality assurance activities, but the respondents stated that the individual actually

only teaches and has no significant engagement in quality assurance-related tasks. The respondents offered three main explanations for this. First, the college has demonstrated little visible commitment and concern for supporting and developing a comprehensive, functional and integrated internal quality assurance unit and activities. Contradictory to the dire situation of the college and the lack of the institutional will to support the development of internal quality assurance, a respondent remarked the importance of safeguarding quality as follows:

I believe that providing training in field of health sciences must be strictly regulated and only allowed to private institutions who are dedicated, willing and capable to invest the necessary resources to guarantee quality education. What most private institutions are doing now is just doing business, and this has detrimental consequences to the wellbeing of society. (MBB2, 08.10.2018)

Second, the scale of the operations of the college has weakened, having been reduced to only two programmes, due to conflict and tension with HERQA and the closing of some of its degree programmes. This was argued to have visibly deflated the internal motivation for maintaining quality and undermined the degree of importance given to internal quality assurance efforts. A respondent who is a member of the college's senior management stated that:

At one time, we had set up an internal quality assurance unit and hired an expert based on the recommendation of HERQA. This unit was provided with support because we wanted to guarantee the quality of our programmes. But I realised that such engagement did not save our college from unfair assessment and fault-finding of HERQA. The pressure to pay bribe was there. I felt that where they could not find good justification, they came up with excuses and minor irregularities to reject our application for accreditation. I think this was done purposely. (MBM1, 06.10.2018)

According to the data, it seems that the college has taken a step back with regard to issues related to the development of internal quality assurance. For instance, the previous institutional quality audit of the college carried out by HERQA in 2014 commended the college for starting to work towards safeguarding the quality of education. This was evidenced by the establishment of an office and an assigned coordinator for quality assurance activities. HERQA also recommended that the institution needs to introduce a robust and comprehensive quality assurance system (HERQA, 2014a). In spite of this, the data gathered as a part of this study found that both the internal office and the coordinator of quality assurance activities are practically non-existent.

Third, the respondents also criticised the lack of support and capacity-building by HERQA for developing the internal quality system. Nonetheless, carefully

weighing these explanations implied that the first and second accounts seem to be more sensible.

Human resources, recruitment and training. The study found that Medco Bio-Medical College currently has no human resources assigned to actively carrying out internal quality assurance. The college formally has a single part-time staff member employed in the position of a quality assurance coordinator who practically barely works on quality assurance-related activities. The data showed that the college, at the time of data collection, was not working on internal quality assurance. A respondent further stated that:

The quality assurance office started to become weak and barely functional since 2016, soon after the turbulent relationship with HERQA began to unfold. Following this, our college hired a quality assurance officer for sake of formality as required by regulation, but the officer has been mainly teaching instead of working on quality assurance activities. Thus, quality assurance gradually faded into the background. (MBB2, 08.10.2018)

Moreover, the data analysis found no systematic mechanism in place at Medco Bio-Medical College for recruiting and training the staff with regard to internal quality assurance responsibilities. The interviews suggested that the college mainly considered, although seemingly nominally, academic qualifications in the areas of health sciences when recruiting its quality assurance coordinator and appeared to have attached less importance to relevant work experience. A respondent claimed that the work contract of the coordinator was submitted to and approved by HERQA, but no document that can substantiate this claim could be gathered. Additionally, the college has not created any opportunity for capacity-building and training for the coordinator and other staff members with respect to issues related to quality assurance.

With regard to other resources, the analysis of the data showed that Medco Bio-Medical College has substantially inadequate tools and instruments for internal quality assessment and allocates barely any financial and material resources to internal quality assurance. The main quality assurance tool utilised at the college has been feedback surveys and questionnaires that are administered to students and teachers to gather feedback on the quality of courses. The college seems to have placed little emphasis on developing an integrated institutional quality assurance policy or several types of guidelines and formats to facilitate the assessment of the quality of the various aspects of its core activities. The absence of a written policy for quality assurance and teaching and learning was noted in the previous institutional audit report of the college (HERQA, 2014a). Moreover, no evidence

was found to suggest that the quality assurance office prepares periodic plans for quality assurance activities or receives funds and material support, except for ordinary stationery supplies.

8.3 Openness and honest reporting in quality assurance

Openness constitutes the third conceptual dimension of trust through which the extent of the trust that quality assurance agencies have in higher education institutions can be explored. As discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework in Chapter Five, openness as a dimension of trust underscores the significance of having a culture of honest critical self-reflection at higher education institutions while undergoing internal and external quality evaluation processes. As such, the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts a given higher education institution can depend on its assessment of how open and honest the institution is regarding its engagement in internal and external quality assurance processes, and its rapport with the quality assurance agency. The honest reporting of institutional strengths and good practices, areas that require development, commitment for quality and quality assurance and the level of the overall institutional capacity possessed for effectively carrying out its quality assurance duties can be significant indicators of the openness of a higher education institution in the eyes of a quality assurance agency. Accordingly, a quality assurance agency may tend to trust a higher education institution that it considers to be honest in its communication concerning quality assurance processes and procedures more than an institution that it believes intentionally engages in deception and communicates misleading information.

In this section, the study presents its main findings from the analysis of the data gathered from the focus groups, interviews and relevant documents. It presents the perceived current status of openness, honest reporting and critical self-assessment at higher education institutions, narratives of deception and the quality game, as well as the explanations for engagement in deception and violations of regulations regarding quality from the perspective of the respondents from HERQA. This is followed by a brief account of how openness is practiced at the higher education institutions that are included in this study. This discussion is significantly shorter than the discussion of concern and overall institutional capacity for quality and quality assurance at these institutions, as the data showed that respondents from HERQA tend to view issues of openness, including risk, primarily from the perspective of the legal status of higher education institutions. The respondents from

HERQA tend to see public and private higher education institutions as groups of institutions with distinct perceived characteristics and attach less significance to the specific identity of each institution selected from these two sectors of higher education.

8.3.1 Current trends: Inadequate openness and honest reporting

The commonly utilised channels of communication between HERQA and higher education institutions include official letters, emails, phone calls, self-evaluations and other quality assurance reporting, on-site visits as part of quality audits, accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations. Additionally, the frequency of communication was criticised for being sporadic and for its dependence on the availability of the tasks that need to be carried out, such as audits, accreditations and other evaluations. In most cases, the communication involves HERQA sending higher education institutions guidelines and checklists for quality assurance and higher education institutions submitting documents and reports that show the implementation of these guidelines. The shortage of human capacity at HERQA contributes to the infrequent and task-oriented communication; this is because the number of public and private higher education institutions has rapidly increased, whereas HERQA has not seen a comparable growth in its capacity. The other instruments of communication between HERQA and higher education institutions are conferences, symposiums and discussion forums on issues related to higher education and quality assurance, which bring together representatives of HERQA, the Ministry of Education, Education Strategy Centre and the community of public and private higher education institutions. In certain cases, HERQA organises trainings and orientations on quality assurance for the staff of higher education institutions, but the study found that HERQA does not have direct communication with the internal quality assurance units of higher education institutions. The communication is carried out through the management of respective institutions.

The data analysis found that HERQA and its quality assurance experts, in their interaction with higher education institutions, take into account the extent to which higher education institutions openly and honestly communicate information related to the institutional status of quality and performance during internal quality assurance procedures, practices and processes. The assessment of openness, combined with the perceived concern and overall institutional capacity for quality assurance and risks, shapes the level of trust that the quality assurance experts of

HERQA are likely to have in higher education institutions. This showed that openness and honest critical self-reflection constitute an integral component of how trustworthy a higher education institution is considered by HERQA.

The data suggested that the respondents from HERQA tend to base their assessment of the perceived openness of higher education institutions on information gathered from various sources. The study found that some of these include the organisational knowledge and information accumulated from prior external evaluation experiences of HERQA's audit and accreditation experts with a specific higher education institution, the history of the relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions, the reputation and institutional image that a higher education institution has built among the experts of HERQA and stakeholders and leads received from concerned members of the public. The information collected from these sources was reported to influence how the respondents from HERQA assessed the perceived openness of a higher education institution. Interestingly, the data showed that these respondents tend to consider the legal status of higher education institutions—that is, whether a higher education institution is a public or private entity—as a key element for assessing the perceived openness of higher education institutions.

The data gathered from the focus group discussions, interviews and review of the relevant documents indicated that the quality assurance experts from HERQA strongly criticise the prevalence of a lack of openness and honest critical self-reflection in the higher education institutions of Ethiopia, particularly in private higher education institutions. There is a commonly shared, largely suspicious and negative outlook towards private higher education institutions among these experts. A respondent remarked, 'the dishonesty and outright deceptions are far more pervasive and bitter in evaluations that involve private institutions' (HAUT5, 03.10.2018). In contrast, the respondents expressed the view that public higher education institutions tend to have less motivation to withhold information about perceived weaknesses in quality and quality assurance from HERQA. This differential outlook on the perceived openness seems to be consistent with the views of the respondents from HERQA regarding the perceived concern and overall institutional capacity of public and private higher education institutions for quality and quality assurance. The other groups of respondents clearly shared the views of the respondents from HERQA regarding the perception that the extent of lack of openness and honest reporting is considerably higher and worrisome at private higher education institutions than at public institutions. These groups comprised respondents from the selected public and private higher education institutions,

governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers and experts from the area of quality assurance in higher education. The respondents also duly acknowledged the presence of exceptional higher education institutions among the generally positively depicted public higher education institutions and the private institutions who tend to be seen with suspicion.

8.3.2 More deception and playing the quality game during accreditation rather than audit evaluations

The data showed that the scale of challenges with regard to openness, honest reporting and critical self-reflection in quality assurance varies for audit and accreditation evaluations. The respondents from HERQA reported that they have encountered such problems more frequently while conducting accreditation evaluations at higher education institutions than when conducting quality audits. This stems from the contrasting structure, focus and implications of these external quality evaluations.

Structurally, external quality assurance in Ethiopia employs a dichotomous approach, wherein both public and private higher education institutions are required to undergo external quality audits, but only private higher education institutions need accreditation permits for each of the programmes they offer. The accreditation permits serve as a license for private institutions to operate, unlike their public counterparts that are exempted from accreditation requirements upon their establishment by the virtue of decree. As of the 2019/20 academic year, there are 50 public universities, which account for about 86 per cent of the country's total enrolment in higher education, and more than 245 accredited private higher education institutions, which are operating in the capacity of a university, university college and college and have a combined enrolment share of about 14 per cent (HERQA, 2020a). Another structural issue is that quality audits are voluntary, whereas accreditation and reaccreditation permits are compulsory. These arguments suggest that HERQA carries out considerably more accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations than quality audits. For example, the strategic objectives of HERQA for its fiscal activities for 2015 to 2020 show that it planned to conduct a total of 32 quality audits at the institutional and programme levels for public and private higher education institutions. In contrast, it planned to conduct 222 accreditations and reaccreditations for private institutions in the 2015/16 academic year alone.

Regarding the focus of the evaluations, quality audits in Ethiopian higher education comprehensively assess several aspects of higher education institutions and their programmes. The model of the programme and institutional quality audit currently being implemented by HERQA focuses on 10 key areas, namely vision, mission and educational goals; governance and management system; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; student admission and support services; programme relevance and curriculum; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and graduate outcomes; research and community outreach activities; and finally, internal quality assurance (HERQA, 2006b, 2007). In contrast, accreditation and re-accreditation or accreditation renewal assessments focus on background information, legal and system documents, programme curriculum and course modules, programme facilities, academic and administrative staff and progress reports and self-evaluation documents of the private higher education institutions (ETQAA, 2016). Each private higher education institution needs to fulfil these criteria to receive accreditation and reaccreditation permits from HERQA, without which no programme can be lawfully operated. The data showed that deceptions and dishonest reporting most frequently occur in relation to programme and institutional facilities, academic staff and student profile and legal documents.

Moreover, quality audits and accreditation evaluations have different implications and consequences. The respondents argued that quality audits carried out at the institutional and programme levels are intended to support quality enhancement at higher education institutions by providing recommendations for improvement and follow ups on development work. Quality audits do not result in direct sanctions and have consequences such as the closure of programmes. Similarly, the results of institutional- and programme-level quality audits do not have direct implications for obtaining or losing accreditation permits. Accreditation permits, on the other hand, are critical for the operation and survival of private higher education institutions. Every private higher education institution needs to have a valid accreditation and reaccreditation permit to be allowed to operate, advertise programmes, lawfully register students, charge tuition fees, teach courses, run programmes, produce graduates and issue credible qualifications. As a result, an accreditation has direct implications for the operational and financial survival of a private higher education institution. These explanations illustrate that accreditation evaluations, in contrast to quality audits, tend to be more likely to incite deception and dishonest reporting by private higher education institutions, whose survival is directly dependent on these evaluations. The scale and depth of the problem of deception is considerably smaller in quality audits. It was reported that a significant number of private institutions have

the tendency to decorate their self-evaluation reports and focus on reporting their strengths while hiding their perceived weaknesses during the discussion with the panel of peer reviewers in quality audits. Public higher education institutions were reported to have rarely engaged in such activities, but certain public institutions still struggle to carry out honest and critical self-assessments. For example, a respondent recalled an experience with audit evaluation at a public institution which demonstrated such issues:

I remember an instance when we were auditing a public university, the self-evaluation report and on-site presentations were overly positive to the extent that we started thinking that it looked more like a report submitted by private institutions. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

The combination of the explanations discussed above provide useful insights into why the proportion of the absence of openness and the widespread dishonest reporting has been greater in quality evaluations related to accreditation and reaccreditation permits than in quality audits.

8.3.3 Common deceptions and dishonest reporting by private higher education institutions

The deception tactics, intentional provision of untruthful and misleading information and violation of regulations regarding quality committed by higher education institutions are largely known to the respondents from HERQA¹¹⁴. There is a relatively widely shared understanding that the majority of these deceptions and unlawful operations have been found to occur in private higher education institutions, and a considerably less number of violations of regulations have been recorded at public institutions.

A review of the recent media reports shows that a sudden inspection by HERQA in and around Addis Ababa found 46 campuses of private higher education institutions operating with major violations of accreditation requirements, minimum quality standards and other irregularities (HERQA, 2019d; Tesfaye, 2019). The inspection found 27 campuses of private institutions in the process of delivering programmes without the required accreditation permit, four running full-time programmes with accreditation permits that were only valid for providing distance

¹¹⁴ The approaches and measures taken by HERQA to deter such violations of regulations and deceptive behaviour of higher education institutions are discussed in Chapter Nine, under section 2.1.1.

education and others running master's programmes through distance learning with accreditation permits that were only valid for full-time master's courses. In addition, six campuses were found where the institutions were actively carrying out teaching with expired accreditation permits. Further, the inspection uncovered three unauthorised campus relocations, three private colleges operating under the false status of a university college without proper authorisation and three campuses where the private institutions closed their gates and refused to provide information to the inspection team (HERQA, 2019d). Other worrisome findings of the inspection were the practice of certain private higher education institutions granting master's degrees to students within durations as short as one or two months and the discovery of institutions that operate using a forged license (HERQA, 2019d). During another inspection, 11 foreign colleges located in the Gambela region of Western Ethiopia were found to be operating graduate programmes without an accreditation license (HERQA, 2019b; Hussien, 2019c).

Similarly, the recent discussion between private higher education institutions and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education identified that the frequent violations of quality regulations and the compromising of standards observed in the private higher education institutions also include granting degrees before the completion of courses, enrolling students before the necessary educational facilities are fulfilled, closing programmes before students complete their studies and graduate, providing training in distance programmes at remote and unaccredited locations and under circumstances where institutions cannot conduct face-to-face tutorial sessions with students, and having serious irregularities in the administrations of examinations and showing negligence regarding widespread cheating practices among students (Kassa, 2019; Wolde, 2019).

The draft document prepared by HERQA in 2018 about the problems regarding the violations of regulations identifies enrolling students and providing training without obtaining or renewing proper programme accreditation permits and providing training in modes of deliveries that are not approved by HERQA as the common violations of the defined regulations. The document exposes the forgery of accreditation certificates by certain private higher education institutions.

Dishonest reporting of institutional and programme facilities

The analysis of the data gathered from the focus group discussions, interviews and relevant documents suggests that the most common deceptions and violations of regulations involve programme and institutional facilities, such as the classrooms,

library, computer centre and internet facilities, programme laboratories and practical learning facilities and offices, which need to be fulfilled if higher education institutions are to acquire accreditation and reaccreditation permits for their programmes. The respondents reported frequent experiences of private higher education institutions borrowing the required programme facilities and institutional resources from other institutions or branch campuses of the same institution. They then presented these as their own to the teams of evaluators from HERQA during accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations in order to meet the minimum standards required to receive the respective permits. However, the same resources were not found at these institutions after a few hours or days, when the experts from HERQA returned to conduct further inspection following a tip-off from the public that the resources presented initially did not belong to the institutions under evaluation. The data suggested that most deceptions take place during accreditation evaluations of private higher education institutions that have more than one branch campus. In such cases, it was reported that learning equipment, institutional facilities and academic and administrative staff are moved to the location of the branch campus that is to undergo the accreditation evaluation. This makes it difficult to confirm whether the relevant equipment and facilities belong to that specific branch campus, since they could have easily been moved from other campuses of the same institution. Moreover, there is a widespread malpractice of enrolling students and starting programmes without properly obtaining the minimum resources and facilities necessary for teaching and learning. The table below presents the main requirements in terms of programme facilities that are needed for granting accreditation permits to private higher education institutions. The data showed that most deceptions and dishonest reporting and presentations have involved these facilities.

Table 6. Requirements in terms of programme facilities for accreditation

Main requirements	Details
Classrooms	Quantity, room size in square meters, number of seats, teaching aids and facilities
Library	Quality, room size in square meters, number of seats, text and reference books by programme, journals, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, desktop computers for database access
Computer centre	Number of computer centres, room size in square meters, number of seats, desktop managers, networking and internet facilities, toolkits
Programme laboratories, demonstrations, workshops	Type and number of laboratories, size in square meters, number of seats, facilities installation, list of laboratory equipment a per laboratory manual or the curriculum
Offices	For academic and administrative purposes equipped with facilities (chairs, tablets, desktops, shelves) as specified in the accreditation guidelines

(Source: ETQAA, 2016)

Certain selected narratives recounted by the respondents, who work as accreditation and audit experts at HERQA, during the focus group discussions are presented below to illuminate the nature and scale of the problem of the lack of openness and honest reporting during external quality evaluations. Most respondents took turns and shared these experiences from accreditation evaluations that they were involved in. There were no marked differences in terms of experience and opinion among the respondents who took part in the focus group discussion. Further, the other respondents agreeably validated the substance of the narratives shared by each respondent.

Narrative 1:

Our accreditation experts once found a private institution with its libraries filled with books from a high school which the institution also operates on the side. The books bore stamps showing they were owned by the institution, but they were books prepared for secondary education. It was just an attempt to mislead us into believing that the library has adequate resource. HERQA had to reject that application for accreditation. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

Narrative 2:

We visited two branch campuses of an institution on the same day, and found several equipment such as library shelves, tables and chairs, books and computers which were presented to us in the morning at the first campus were again on display in the afternoon at the second campus. (HAUT4, 03.10.2018)

Narrative 3:

One time, we were conducting accreditation evaluation at two branch campuses of the same private institution located in different cities. Immediately after we finished assessing the first branch campus, the institution had transported its equipment from the campus that was already assessed to the other campus which was scheduled to be visited by accreditation experts the following day. But the institution then suddenly placed a phone call to our experts to cancel the appointment agreed weeks in advance for the evaluation of the second campus, contradicting the confirmation they had already sent us few days ago that both sites. We knew there was a problem, but later our suspicion was confirmed when we learned of the unfortunate accident the lorry that was transporting the equipment had, which meant the deception planned by the institution could not go as hoped. (HACC2, 04.10.2018)

Narrative 4:

We went for accreditation evaluation to separate institutions which we later learned were owned by relatives. We had also received information that they shared equipment. We scheduled our visits to these two institutions consecutively within hours on the same day. We finished our visit at the first location, and we made calls to the other institution to request their guidance since we didn't know the exact location of their campus. They did not answer our calls for hours. Later they called back to us at 6 pm and said they were waiting for us and even asked if we had cancelled the visit. We suspected that they ignored our calls up until that point because they likely hadn't yet finished moving equipment from the other institution over to their premises. Armed with our suspicion, we then went back the following day to the first location we already visited and found that the premise was locked, and no one was there. When we asked for information in the shop that was in front of the premise, we learned that the institution had already moved its equipment and facilities out from that premise the previous day. That way, we knew that the resources from the first institution were transported to the second institution. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

Narrative 5:

The team of experts which I was part of once travelled outside Addis Ababa for accreditation. Our schedule was to first visit the first branch campus of an institution, then visit a second institution in the same city, and later evaluate the second branch campus of the first institution located in another city. We conducted the first two visits and headed to lunch. There, we saw that the institution whose first branch campus we already evaluated was transporting equipment out of the campus. We then went back to that branch campus where the security guard told us that the owners were moving the equipment to the other branch campus in another city, which we knew was scheduled to be evaluated the following day. At that moment, the head of that branch campus came out of the office and became confrontational when we asked him questions. We were repeatedly asked us to leave claiming that our business in that premise was already completed in the morning and that we had no legal reason to come back and ask further questions. (HACC2, 04.10.2018)

In addition to providing insight into the nature of the widespread deceptions, the narratives presented above show that certain private institutions tend to cancel the appointments that they had set in advance with HERQA for an accreditation visit after realising that the evaluators from HERQA were aware of the common deception tactics used by institutions and had begun employing different mechanisms for cross-checking the associated aspects. These techniques are also used when institutions realise that they would have little time to move resources and equipment around and when the chance of deceiving the accreditation experts is perceived to be low.

Despite most of the narratives shared by respondents being related to deceptions involving movable materials and equipment, the data from the focus group discussions also indicated that the respondents from HERQA have come across instances where entire building facilities were a part of the deception practices used by private higher education institutions. The following narratives illuminate such practices.

Narrative 6:

It was a building that was still under construction. The sections of the building we were showed look much like hotel rooms. The institution showed us many rooms with good quality equipment and facilities. We were showed that the office of distance education for that specific branch had 6 spacious rooms fitted with by far a better equipment and claimed that it was led by an individual with a master's degree qualification. We obviously found that unconvincing. We did not believe them, and we requested for a lease agreement or evidence of ownership for the building as required in the accreditation criteria, but they couldn't. Then we left the premises and returned to the same location on the third day and found that the building was empty. Surprisingly, the owner of that private institution had the audacity to visit our office and submit a complaint after his application for accreditation was rejected. But we were well-organised and had actively communicated our progress on the field to the director of HERQA. Our director confronted the person with this information and the person who came to complain left the office shortly realising the decision of HERQA was not going to be overturned. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

Narrative 7:

We visited a private institution located in a spacious building that looked like a residential villa. The staff told us that the institution had rented the facility and was even planning to set-up a small cafeteria for students attending distance programmes. Mind you, what kind of a private institution invests money and resources in establishing refreshment facilities for students who are taking programmes remotely? We were not convinced. So, we had to return to the same location after few days only to find an old lady living in the villa. We learned from her that the institution had

already moved its resources and equipment out. That application for accreditation was therefore rejected. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

The narratives presented above reiterate the prevalent lack of openness and honest reporting during accreditation evaluations. They illustrate the ‘cat and mouse’ interaction between the accreditation experts from HERQA and private higher education institutions. This suggests that it has become common for private institutions to deploy creative deceptive tactics to positively misrepresent their programme and institutional facilities and hide their perceived shortcomings from the team of evaluators¹¹⁵ from HERQA. The experts approach most evaluations with a generally suspicious attitude and carry out additional inspections to prevent such deceptions. In many cases, HERQA rejects the applications for accreditation, reaccreditation and accreditation renewal of programmes that are submitted by private higher education institutions that have previously been caught engaging in deceptions. Such higher education institutions are required to provide evidence that the facilities and equipment in their premises belong to them and apply for reaccreditation.

Dishonest reporting of information regarding academics and administrative staff

Another common deception by private higher education institutions is associated with their academic and administrative staff. It was reported that many institutions have misrepresented the number, qualification, employment status and contract, testimonial form and other key information on staff profiles. The table below presents the main requirements in terms of academic and administrative facilities for granting accreditation permits to private higher education institutions. Many private institutions have attempted to evade the requirements for fulfilling these criteria while trying to secure the accreditation and reaccreditation permits necessary for their operations.

¹¹⁵ The team of evaluators who conduct accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations comprises three experts from HERQA and an external assessor who is a member of the academic staff of another institution and considered an expert in the field and programme under evaluation.

Table 7. Requirements regarding academic and administrative staff for accreditation

Main requirements	Details
Academic and technical staff	List of teachers and technicians by programme, evidence of qualification, employment, contract agreement ¹¹⁶ , academic status
Administrative staff	List of employees at all positions, evidences of qualification and employment

(Source: ETQAA, 2016)

The following narratives taken from the focus group discussions provide further insight into the nature of the deception and dishonest reporting with respect to the academic and administrative staff. The data suggest that the respondents from HERQA are aware of the most frequently utilised deceptions and, as a result, put additional effort into thoroughly assessing and cross-checking the information presented in the documents with the reality. The narratives also suggest that the cat and mouse situation has become recurrent and complex.

Narrative 8:

We went for accreditation evaluation at a private institution and one of our colleagues, who was serving as an external assessor in the team of experts, found his own CV in the staff profile the institution presented to us. He was shocked in disbelief. (HAUT2, 03.10.2018)

Narrative 9:

In one instance, a private institution presented a testimonial form of a teacher whose name and profile we knew, but the institution had attached the photograph of another person on the form. What was outrageous was that the institution presented the person whose photograph was attached onto the profile to join the round table discussion with us during the accreditation visit. The person attempted to impersonate the identity of the person whose profile he was representing and continued in the discussion. So, we asked him to show us his ID, and that obviously exposed the deception. Private institutions go to such extent to deceive us. (HACC2, 04.10.2018)

Narrative 10:

During an accreditation visit, an institution presented to me the profile of its staff. In it was the profile of one of my close friends. I was surprised because I knew at the

¹¹⁶ Currently, private higher education institutions are also required to provide testimonial forms signed by all permanent academic staff members, which confirm that they work full-time only at the institution in question and are not simultaneously working under any form of arrangement at another private or public higher education institution.

time my colleague was teaching in Addis Ababa University, and therefore was confused how he could also be teaching more than 300 km away at a private institution in the city of Wolaita Sodo. I asked the institution if he truly was their staff, and they produced the consent form supposedly signed by him. But he and I used to work together some years ago in another organisation, and I had his phone number at the time. So, during coffee break, I placed a call to him. He was surprised by the information and said he only works for that private institution on a part-time basis in the branch campus they have in another city called Hawassa, and also that the consent form he signed and personal CV he gave them was meant to be used only for that branch campus. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

Narrative 11:

There was a teacher whom we met at three different private institutions claiming to be a full-time member of each of these institutions. We have also found a person presenting himself as a dean in two private institutions within the same period. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

These narratives are further corroborated by a review of the recent media reports, which shows that private higher education institutions have developed a reputation for presenting the profiles of academic staff, permanently employed elsewhere, as their own during accreditation and audit evaluations (HERQA, 2020b; Tesfa, 2020). Similarly, the draft document prepared by HERQA in 2018 regarding the issues related to the violations of regulations indicates that most private higher education institutions attempt to deceive HERQA by presenting false and fabricated profiles of their academic staff and by presenting non-existent staff members as full-time employees. These reports show how greatly the practices of deception and playing the quality game have grown in the private sector. This also suggests that a majority of the private institutions that engage in such deceptions staff their programmes with individuals who do not meet the qualifications set by the Ministry of Education and HERQA.

Along with the evidently weak internal drive for the open and honest reporting of information related to quality and quality assurance at private higher education institutions, the respondents emphasised that the academic staff working at these institutions play a role in the deception. Certain academic professionals rent out their CVs and profiles to multiple institutions and, in some cases, go to the extent of participating in on-site interviews and discussions during accreditations and reaccreditations, effectively representing more than one private institution. This suggests that some academics and experts make money by providing their profiles in order to be presented as permanent staff members at multiple private institutions. This was argued to have contributed to the deterioration of quality at private

institutions. For example, it has enabled private institutions to secure accreditation permits and provide programmes by showing that they have an adequate number of well-qualified teachers, while, in fact, the reality can be the opposite.

Dishonest reporting of information regarding students

Additionally, deceptions and dishonest reporting have become common when reporting information pertaining to the admission, registration, number and graduation of students. Many private institutions have been caught having enrolled students who do not meet the national admission criteria, which are defined by the Minister of Education, for being granted entry into higher education. The data from the focus group discussions show that private higher education institutions more frequently abuse and exceed the number of students allowed by the accreditation and reaccreditation permits received for programmes, particularly in those delivered through evening lectures. Respecting the regulations regarding the number of students is possible in regular programmes delivered during the day because most private institutions struggle to find enough students for these, but these institutions often enrol students beyond the permitted limit in programmes taught through evening classes.

The following narratives illuminate such dishonest reporting of information with respect to students.

Narrative 12:

Private institutions know that HERQA's experts request records of the registrar's office to check whether students enrolled meet the entry criteria approved by the Ministry of Education. As a result, they present their registered database showing only those students who were admitted meeting the criteria to our experts, but keep the real record hidden which contains students admitted with irregularities and violation of the national entry criteria and. Because we know this, at one time, I requested the list of students studying in one programme and I wandered around the campus and randomly asked a student what he was studying and to show me his ID card. When I compared his information with the record I was provided, I found that he wasn't in the official record. Then I asked the student how he was admitted into the programme and what he told confirmed to me that his admission violated the nationally entry requirement. This shows that institutions try to hide HERQA's experts from accessing the real records showing students who were admitted with merits clearly falling below the national entry standard. Usually this record shows large number of students than the official record. (HACC2, 04.10.2018)

Narrative 13:

Even those private institutions considered as the best violate regulations on number of students approved by accreditation permits for programmes. For example, even the best private institutions have been caught enrolling and graduating as many as 2000 students with an accreditation for running a programme at a bachelor's degree level to be delivered as a regular programme to no more than 50 students with a permanent teaching staff comprising at least two with master's and one bachelor's qualification. Because of this we are playing the cat and mouse game. This is also partly our since we should have failed to request the list of those 50 students approved by the accreditation and later crosscheck the list of graduates in that same programme. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

Consistent with such findings obtained from the focus group discussions and interview data, a draft document prepared by HERQA in 2018, which reviewed the issues related to violations of regulations, found that the common violations committed by private institutions include enrolling and graduating more students than approved by HERQA upon being granted accreditation and reaccreditation of respective programmes and enrolling and graduating students who do not meet the entrance criteria set for higher education by the Ministry of Education. According to the document, these illegal admissions include the admission of students who do not fulfil the Centre of Competence (COC) qualifications, admission of students with a diploma of teachers' education into degree programmes, admission of students who have a diploma qualification from inapplicable and unrelated fields into degree programmes and admission involving a direct transition from social sciences to natural science fields.

Furthermore, a review of recent media reports further indicates that HERQA was officially notified of a total of only 78,000 students studying at private higher education institutions, as declared in the accreditation permits that were granted, but whereas the inspection conducted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education uncovered around 202,000 students enrolled in private higher education institutions across the country (HERQA, 2019a; Hussien, 2019c; Wolde, 2019)¹¹⁷. The respondents from HERQA further suspect the likelihood that the figure could change yet again when private higher education institutions report their operations to the Ethiopian Ministry of Revenues for tax purposes. The researcher further

¹¹⁷ In a recent press release, HERQA reported that it has managed to gather, organise and archive information about 1.6 million graduates and students enrolled in private higher education institutions (HERQA, 2020j). The report underlined the suspicion of the agency that the actual number of students and graduates at private institutions could still be larger given the prevalence of intentional misreporting and the refusal by institutions to relinquish information.

reviewed a letter sent by HERQA to private higher education institutions in June 2020. The letter clearly cited the failure of many private institutions to submit accurate and up-to-date information regarding the students who they enrolled prior to the 2019/20 academic year, those currently completing their education, those in the final year of their studies and those who have graduated in the past. The institutions have not furnished this information despite repeated requests from HERQA. In the letter, HERQA further threatens to discontinue its services for those institutions that fail to respond accordingly.

The practice of deception extends to programme implementations, where academic regulations are circumvented by higher education institutions to fast-track the graduation of students in direct violation of the regulations. The draft document prepared by HERQA illustrates that certain private higher education institutions grant degrees to students who do not meet the requirements related to the duration of studies, such as the credit hours, semesters and, sometimes, years, set for programmes. The narrative below provides more information regarding such problems.

Narrative 14:

I have come across several private institutions who did not meet the minimum number of 108 to 111 credit hours specified for degree programmes. These institutions however unlawfully graduate their students and later request HERQA to authenticate qualifications they issued. We have found that there are inconsistencies between the final certificates they issue to students and the certificates they submit to HERQA. To me, this is a reminder of how our operations are being challenged everyday by deceptive institutions. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

Dishonest reporting of programme curriculum and course modules

Moreover, the audit and accreditation experts from HERQA reported instances where private higher education institutions attempted to deceive the teams of evaluators with regard to programme curriculum and course modules during accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations. Such dishonest reporting mainly involved presenting a programme curriculum and module-related materials that were developed elsewhere or taken from other higher education institutions and presented as their own. In certain cases, such documents have been found to be fabricated and doctored. The table below presents the main requirements for programme curricula and course modules that private higher education institutions need to fulfil to obtain accreditation permits from HERQA for their degree programmes.

Table 8. Requirements of programme curriculum and course modules for accreditation

Main requirements	Details
Introductory part	Nomenclature, introduction and background, need assessment and rationale, programme objectives and aims, graduate profiles, teaching methods, assessment methods, admission criteria, quality assurance, programme resources All curricula have to be adapted from the nationally harmonised curriculum.
Course breakdown	Course category, prerequisites, course load, semester load, course sequence, etc.
Course syllabus	Course title, code, load and prerequisite, course description, course objectives, course content, teaching methods, assessment methods, texts and references
Course material and modules	Course material developed by the higher education institution for each course based on course syllabus

(Source: ETQAA, 2016)

The following narrative provides an insight into the challenges that the respondents from HERQA reported in relation to basic programme documents being doctored by higher education institutions. They do this to hide the absence of well-developed and functional programme curricula and course modules and positively misrepresent the status of such requirements, which is necessary for securing accreditation and reaccreditation permits.

Narrative 15:

I remember one hilarious deception a private institution tried to pull off. It involved curriculum and course outline documents. Let's imagine that the name of the institution was 'Trick'. We found a course in one of their curriculum and course outline that was labelled 'Trickology'. We were initially confused but quickly realised that it was a mistake the institution made when trying to quickly edit curriculum and course outline documents taken from another institution whose actual name was 'Pharma College'. We understood that the institution we were visiting simply used the function of find all 'Pharma' and replace with 'Trick' in an effort to present the documents as its own. This worries me more than the deception in equipment and facilities because such working documents are crucial for the operation of these institutions. Unfortunately, it means that the documents were not actually used in guiding the delivery of education. (HAUT2, 03.10.2018)

Narrative 16:

An institution presented a curriculum of its graduate programme during an accreditation. To our surprise, the external assessor in our team of experts, who is an experienced professor from another institution, clearly identified that the curriculum was in fact prepared by himself for his home institution. He was upset and asked the institution how they could be effortless to not try to adapt it to the context of their

programme or even provide a proper acknowledgement that they adopted their curriculum from another institution. It was clear to us that the intention of the institution was to deceive us by presenting the curriculum as its own. (HAUT2, 03.10.2018)

These narratives indicate that the respondents from HERQA face such dishonest reporting frequently, which has contributed to increasing their scepticism towards private higher education institutions. This creates barriers for the development of trust between HERQA and private higher education institutions.

Moreover, it was reported that private higher education institutions often intentionally portray themselves as having legally been granted a higher institutional status (for example, institutes with an official status of a college advertise themselves as university college) in order to attract more fee-paying students (HERQA, 2019b, 2020d, 2020e; Tesfaye, 2019). According to official reports from HERQA, out of a total of more than 200 private higher education institutions, there are only four universities, five university colleges, 10 institutes and the large remaining number of organisations operate with a rank of a college (Hussien, 2019c). The higher education proclamation (650/2009), specifically Articles 9 and 11-14, stipulate four types of statuses for higher education institutions, namely university, university college, college and institute, along the criteria for achieving each of these statuses (FDRE, 2009).

8.3.4 Deception and violations of regulations at public higher education institutions

The data analysis showed that the scale of deception, dishonest reporting and violations of the regulations for quality in public higher education institutions is considerably lower than that in private institutions. The violation of the regulations for quality by public higher education institutions mainly involves the provision of training in non-regular programmes on a tuition fee basis without the approval of HERQA, running distance programmes in prohibited fields and illegally operating joint programmes in partnership with private institutions. Recent media reports show that HERQA has shutdown programmes that four public universities, namely Debre Markos University, Bahir Dar University, Haramaya University and Jimma University, were delivering outside their main campus premises in partnership with private institutes (Hussien, 2019b, 2019e). A closer look into the justification given by HERQA for taking such measures reveals at least five reasons for this (Hussien,

2019b). First, the programmes needed to have accreditation permits, since they were being delivered jointly with private higher education institutions. Second, some of the partner private institutions themselves did not have any type of license to operate as a business organisation, let alone a higher education institution. Third, the programmes were being delivered using branch campuses established without the approval of the Council of Ministers, for instance, in the case of the branch campus that Jimma University opened in Addis Ababa. Fourth, running the programmes in these branch campuses that were located far from the main campus premises of the universities was argued to contribute to an inefficient utilisation of public resources, for example, since it involves the academic staff travelling long distances and requires them to be away for weeks from their daily responsibilities of teaching in regular programmes and research. Fifth, these types of joint programmes are currently prohibited, since the government has not yet issued a legislative framework that will guide the management, funding, auditing and other administrative issues pertaining to such partnerships between public universities and private higher education institutions (HERQA, 2018c). As such, complex issues regarding the accreditation status of the programme, partner private institutions and branch campuses are argued to endanger the adherence to minimum quality standards (Hussien, 2019e).

The data from the focus group discussions and interviews with the respondents from HERQA indicate that the most common violations that public universities commit is engagement in business activities, for example, by providing programmes through non-regular modalities such as distance, weekend and evening classes without the approval of HERQA. Although the higher education proclamation (650/2009) makes provision for public universities to engage in income-generating activities, for example, through providing consultancy and contract research (FDRE, 2009, Art. 66), the respondents from HERQA argued that generating income from teaching programmes delivered through non-regular modalities is not a part of this provision¹¹⁸. Further, the education provided at public universities should not be used as a source of income, since the institutes are fully funded by the federal government¹¹⁹. It was reported that public universities have started to provide many programmes through non-regular modalities, charge higher tuition fees per credit hour, compete amongst each other for students and have even gone to the extent of

¹¹⁸ The proclamation grants any public institution the right to establish an income-generating enterprise that could produce income from the services it renders and the activities it carries out (FDRE, 2009, Art. 66[4/a]).

¹¹⁹ Despite the claims made by the respondents, the proclamation clearly grants public institutions the right to charge tuition fees (FDRE, 2009, Art. 91[1/a]).

granting admission to students who do not fulfil the national entry criteria. They were also found to be enrolling students into master's programmes, at times, without them fulfilling the prerequisite of having a bachelor's degree in related fields. Certain public universities, such as Jimma University, have gone to the extent of providing training in the field of medicine through such modalities. A respondent from the legal services of HERQA stated that such distance programmes were found to be operated by Bahir Dar University, Mekelle University and Jimma University, all of which are first-generation public universities that have relatively better institutional resources and experience, without approval from HERQA.

8.3.5 Reasons for dishonest reporting and lack of openness

The data analysis found that six main explanations were put forth by the respondents for the lack of openness and widespread engagement in deception and dishonest reporting during quality assurance evaluations. First, the analysis of the data suggests that the lack of strong institutional commitment and concern regarding quality assurance and the resistance to external quality evaluations form an intrinsic barrier to openness and the honest reporting of perceived strengths and weaknesses by higher education institutions. It was argued that higher education institutions, both private and public, are increasingly beginning to see external quality assurance requirements as a burden that cannot be overlooked for legal and accountability reasons. The academic and administrative staff seem to have developed 'resistance and resentment towards external quality assurance' (HAUT1, 03.10.2018). As a result, higher education institutions can be tempted to engage in dishonest reporting, presenting borrowed facilities as their own and providing doctored documentations. The lack of adequate awareness regarding the dangers that compromising quality standards can pose for the future of the country's youth and national wellbeing contributes to these problems. The misunderstanding of the purpose of the minimum quality standards specified by HERQA and the Ministry of Education, by both private higher education institutions and their customers, can further complicate the problem. The pressure from some students and customers can push institutions to compromise quality standards regarding admission, assessment and grading, and graduation. Such customers may care less about quality and, instead, may seek to use money to be able to enrol into programmes and graduate with a degree. These customers can push private institutions to violate the standards of operation. This can be seen as an influencing factor.

Second, the respondents argued that the necessity of the accreditation and reaccreditation permits for the existence and survival of private higher education has created a pressure on them to hide their perceived weaknesses and features of institutional status that do not meet the requirements specified by HERQA. This pressure and desire to secure accreditation permits, which ensure the legal existence and continuity of institutions and their programmes, was argued to be one of the key factors that leads to private higher education institutions engaging in deception.

Third, many respondents claimed that the root cause for the dishonest reporting in quality issues and the violation of regulations by private higher education institutions is their capacity and resource constraints. Such financial and overall capacity limitations mean that many private higher education institutions are unable to meet the requirements in terms of programme and institutional facilities, such as adequate classrooms, library, laboratory, computer centre and offices, that are stipulated for obtaining accreditation and reaccreditation permits. The limitations of the resources required to provide education as per the defined quality standards seem to be worse at smaller institutions that lack sufficient awareness and capacity. This, as a result, often pushes them to engage in illegal activities. The respondents from the private higher education institutions also state that the lack of support from the government, such as for facilitating access to land and granting permission to import the equipment necessary for teaching and learning activities tax-free, has exacerbated the capacity limitations of private institutions. The respondents also highlighted that even private institutions that have a sound financial standing have been caught breaching regulations and operating in ways that neglected quality.

Fourth, the presence of a relatively strong profit orientation is argued to account, in part, for the central reason behind disregarding regulations for quality and the prevalent engagement in deception at many private higher education institutions. The prioritising of business interests over academic objectives threatens responsible operations and openness. This is because, as argued by the respondents, it would be challenging, if not unfeasible, to financially survive and earn profits by strictly adhering to the defined regulations and maintaining the honest reporting of weaknesses. Private institutions are aware that they can accumulate higher profits by providing education that is short of the minimum quality standards. There is a strong motivation at these institutions to increase their profit margin. The respondents further expressed their confidence that it would be unlikely to locate a private institution that strictly adheres to the regulations concerning, for instance, the number of students allowed in each programme by the respective accreditation permits. A respondent claimed that ‘no such institution can really exist, since it would

not be financially feasible to only enrol the number of students approved by HERQA for each programme while having to pay hefty rental bills for their facilities' (HAUT5, 03.10.2018). Fulfilling standards and adhering to regulations would require institutions to spend more and reduce their profit margin. The following excerpt taken from the focus group discussion with the team of quality audit experts from HERQA further highlights the negative impacts that fully abiding by the regulations and dedicating resources to providing a high-quality education may have on the financial wellbeing of private higher education institutions:

What I have observed from working at HERQA over the past decade is that the situation in Ethiopia appears to be the opposite of trends we see in other countries. Here, those private institutions who adhere to regulations and are committed to meeting minimum quality standards often and surely end up bankrupted. They cannot financially survive while operating responsibly. We learned this from the experience of Zega Business College, Roha college and other responsible institutions which sadly could not survive and become profitable¹²⁰. When I see this, I increasingly come to the conclusion that those private institutions who have developed and expanded over the years must have done so through compromising quality, violating regulations and somehow operating outside the law. But the trend internationally is such that those quality and prestigious institutions are the ones who mostly attract the best teachers and students and thrive financially. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

Meanwhile, it would thus be impossible for private institutions to provide education without making profits. As such, prioritising cost minimisation and profit maximisation can explain why many private higher education institutions admit students who do not meet national entry criteria, enrol students without fulfilling the necessary programme facilities, deliver programmes through modalities other than those approved by the accreditation permits, teach courses with insufficient and underqualified academic staff and engage in another deceptions.

Fifth, the engagement of public and private higher education institutions in dishonest reporting and deception was explained by their desire to avoid criticism and create a positive image of their institution. Accordingly, withholding information regarding their perceived weaknesses and overstating their strengths and achievements have been utilised to build their reputation for having high-quality and responsible operations. The respondents argued this explanation, rather than

¹²⁰ The researcher could not find additional evidence to confirm the claim that such institutions failed to survive mainly as a result of their commitment to quality and subsequent narrow profit margin. A critical examination of such claims would be significant since some respondents have also indicated that many private institutions under shared ownership often fail to survive while those under private ownership have come out stronger and, in some cases, achieved a university status.

survival or business interests, account for the limited instances of false reporting by public institutions.

Additionally, respondents argued that capacity limitations at HERQA and gaps in external quality evaluation and monitoring procedures further exacerbate deception. Four key issues were raised in relation to external quality assurance. The first issue that was identified by the respondents was the tendency of quality assurance evaluations, both internal and external, to focus on monitoring and regulating higher education institutions. It was argued that, for this to change, quality assurance needs to prioritise playing a supportive role rather than becoming ‘an instrument of fault-finding that threatens institutions’ (MKM1, 24.09.2018). This can facilitate the admission of weaknesses and the commitment to improving operations. The second issue with external quality evaluation is the fact that site visits for accreditation and audits are announced and agreed upon in advance by the higher education institutions and HERQA, which has been argued to provide institutions with sufficient time to organise superficial presentations of facilities, prepare doctored documents, decorate campuses and train staff regarding how to respond to questions from external reviewers. This creates additional challenges for accurately identifying an institution’s strengths, good practices and areas that need development and generating valid evidence to justify relevant sanctions. Many respondents, as a result, argued in favour of employing surprise visits for accreditation and audit evaluations despite reports that many private higher education institutions repeatedly expressed their wish for such an approach to be abandoned. Currently, HERQA conducts some surprise visits at higher education institutions when it receives information from concerned stakeholders or when it has a reasonable suspicion concerning possible violations of regulations and unlawful operations¹²¹.

The third issue identified by the respondents suggests that private higher education institutions are further encouraged to engage in deception because they know that it is unlikely that the same team of accreditation experts from HERQA will visit all the institutions or branch campuses located in a given area or city. They count on the likelihood that different teams of evaluators will visit each institution or branch campus. The fourth issue concerns the lack of frequent follow ups and monitoring of private higher education institutions by HERQA and regional organs

¹²¹ When information is received from the public about irregularities and violations of regulations, HERQA sets up a team and conducts an unannounced visit to investigate the matter at the private institution in question. However, the majority of the site visits HERQA currently conducts at both private and public higher education institutions are announced beforehand.

of government (for example, as found in the case of the Gambela regional state) combined with the limited capacity and geographical coverage of HERQA. This has left a void in HERQA's capacity to effectively deter the rampant violation of regulations (Hussien, 2019c). As recent media reports suggest, however, little action was taken by the regional state for more than six months after the initial reporting and after HERQA requested the regional administration to halt the operations of these illegal colleges (HERQA, 2019b; Hussien, 2019c). A review of HERQA's roles and functions by a panel of international experts found that HERQA being based in the capital city and the absence of its regional presence create issues associated with distance and geography, which limit HERQA's capacity to monitor and address the needs of the higher education institutions that are located in remote areas (Henson et al., 2016).

8.3.6 A brief examination of openness at the case higher education institutions

In the section below, the study presents a brief analysis of the trends of openness, honest reporting and critical self-assessment in quality assurance at the higher education institutions included in this study. This is expected to provide greater insight into how these case institutions practice openness in quality assurance. This discussion is significantly shorter than the previous discussion on concern and overall institutional capacity for quality and quality assurance due to two main reasons. First, as indicated at the beginning of section 8.3, the data showed that the respondents from HERQA tend to view issues of openness, including risk, primarily from the perspective of legal status of higher education institutions. These respondents tend to see public and private higher education institutions as two groups of institutions with distinct perceived characteristics and are less dependent on the specific identity of each institution selected from these two sectors of higher education. The other reason is the difficulty of tangibly confirming the reported practices of openness. It is logical to expect that the respondents at the studied higher education institutions would be more inclined to claim or report perceived positive practices of honest reporting than to openly admit to engaging in deception, dishonest reporting and violation of the regulations for quality. An additional challenge in this regard is the secretive and hidden nature of deception, dishonest reporting and violation of regulations, which creates an obstacle for concretely confirming and refuting such practices through research data.

Mekelle University: Hesitation to report weaknesses

The staff of the internal quality assurance office of Mekelle University tend to see the monitoring and follow up mechanisms positively, including the quality audit implemented by HERQA in public higher education institutions, as having the intention of supporting institutions with reinforcing their strengths and improving on their weaknesses. The roles of the quality assurance endeavours initiated by HERQA are understood to be directed towards improving institutional operations rather than controlling them. The respondents have expressed their respect for the experts from HERQA and their professionalism, while also suggesting that the supportive and follow up roles of HERQA be reinforced to further enhance quality improvements at the institutional level.

The data show that the extent of open and honest reporting in quality assurance at Mekelle University significantly varies across departments. Not all departments have similar practices. On one hand, it was reported that some departments, such as sociology, psychology, geography and history, due to the experience of their staff and concern for quality, carry out critical and honest self-assessments and openly report the weaknesses they have uncovered through their self-audit. The coordinator of the college-level quality assurance activities reported that these departments provide relatively consistent and truthful data, which was confirmed by the information collection from the course evaluations filled by students.

On the other hand, it was reported that several departments at Mekelle University have not developed the habit of open and honest reporting during quality assurance evaluations. The respondents criticised that most of the academic staff members tend to hesitate to conduct a critical self-assessment for, at least, five main reasons. First, the staff the internal quality assurance office reported the existence of gaps in the awareness about the significance of openly reporting weaknesses for supporting improvements in the quality of core operations. The capacity of self-evaluations and external quality audits for facilitating the identification of an institution's strengths and good practices and the provision of suggestions for improving the areas that require development currently seem to not have been fully understood at the grassroots level. Second, some leaders are committed to utilising internal quality assurance for identifying areas in need of development, whereas others seem to be interested in stifling reports of perceived weaknesses. As a result, inflated reporting has been observed in some audit processes. A respondent further commented:

We have also come across unsupportive leadership and sometimes leaders who become unhappy when we reported challenges and gaps identified through quality assessments. They complain that we often report problems and ask us why we don't

try to solve things on our own. I think this creates a pressure in favour of hiding weaknesses and problems. (MKC2, 24.09.2018)

Such accounts underline that the understanding and commitment of the leaders at all levels of the university are key for cultivating or suppressing honest reporting. Third, it has not become routine to openly report perceived weaknesses and gaps due to a widespread perception of audits and quality evaluations as being mechanisms of fault-finding. Fourth, the respondents indicated that the evasion of critical self-assessment and honest reporting are partially motivated by a desire to create a positive image of one's unit or department, preserve one's position or attain a promotion and protect fellow staff members from disciplinary measures. For example, a respondent recounted an instance that provides an insight into such accounts:

In the college quality assurance forums, I sometimes observe reports made by department level focal persons which are far from the reality. We have also come across instances where departments reported positively on the implementation of a course, but we later learned that was not the case when we spoke to students. I want to be honest with you. There was a time when some colleges reported suspicious figures that, for example, around 90 per cent of teaching staff successfully implemented the 'Day one, Class one' directive and that continuous assessment of students was implemented with 100 per cent success. It was then decided for college quality assurance heads to check the veracity of reports submitted by each other's colleges. However, when we looked at the actual reports from students, we found that the reported figures were in fact inflated and misleading. We identified that teachers in some of the courses only delivered lectures around the end of the semester when exams were approaching. We also discovered many courses which were not even 50 per cent completed just a week before final examination. This shows the widespread practices of exaggerating achievements and concealing gaps. This is the truth that is often kept a secret. (MKC2, 24.09.2018)

The fifth explanation offered by the respondents was the prevalent habit of blaming others and attributing the causes for the poor quality of education to a lack of sufficient support from the university and the low calibre of students. The academic staff often tend to avoid considering the causes of the quality problems to be associated with them not executing their responsibilities properly.

Wollo University: Overstating accomplishments

The analysis of the interview data suggest that the trend of openness and honest reporting varies across departments. It was reported that some departments practice

honest reporting, while others tend to be secretive and resistant towards quality audits and inspection. The self-evaluation carried out in 2018, based on the 10 focus areas approved by HERQA, uncovered instances wherein departments and academic staff attempted to cover up their weaknesses and overstated their performance. It was reported that certain academic staff members hid gaps regarding course coverage, implementation of the 'Day one, Class one' directive, application of continuous assessment (often due to poor time management) and whether courses are implemented according to the syllabus planned in the curricula and course outline. Further supporting such issues, the students have claimed that the teachers do not cover the entire course content that they are tested on (HERQA, 2014b). The staff of the internal quality assurance office reported that the implementation of practice-based learning is often overstated when reported for quality assurance purposes. Currently, the internal quality assurance office is working to improve inspection and the use of checklists to deter the practice of some teachers grading students without supervising the practical learning sessions. Additionally, a review of the previous institutional quality audit report revealed that student representatives disclosed to peer reviewers that they were requested to change their evaluations of academic staff whom they rated poorly (HERQA, 2014b, p. 39). This compromises the validity and reliability of such staff evaluation practices.

There are existing procedures for departments to review their programmes and identify their strengths and the aspects that need to be improved. However, the process is not yet systematic and is not explicitly guided by the quality assurance system. The departments strive to safeguard their professional expectations, standards and values, albeit not in an institutionalised manner that would guarantee that all 76 programmes of the university are implemented in a comparable and consistent manner.

Woldia University: Openness challenged at the grassroots

The data from the interviews found mixed evidence that suggests a gradually improving practice of relatively honest reporting and critical self-evaluations of performance, which is challenged by tendencies of withholding weaknesses at the grassroots level in Woldia University. The respondents argued that, in most cases, quality is assessed critically and reported more openly rather than being altered intentionally to project a positive image or avoid criticism. The staff of the internal quality assurance office claimed to observe fewer attempts at hiding weaknesses in departments. For example, a respondent added:

During internal audit, I have observed that departments honestly report what they have accomplished and failed to implement. They also try to provide justifications when doing so. I haven't come across a problem of concealing or giving untruthful information. In our university, departments seem to have a relatively more positive attitude towards the quality assurance directorate and its activities. Their weakness is in developing and implementing enhancement plans based on quality assessments. (WB2, 01.10.2018)

Moreover, it seems that Woldia University has made efforts in favour of honestly and openly reporting performance and findings from quality assessments to internal and external stakeholders. The respondents claimed that the university chose to honestly indicate major strengths and weaknesses in the self-assessment report it submits during the supervision visits by experts from the Ministry of Education.

However, an interview with a college dean indicated the inflation of achievements to a certain degree and a hesitation to report weaknesses among the academic staff. In such cases, collecting data from various sources has assisted in verifying the accuracy of the reports. A respondent argued that the motivation for such intentionally misleading reporting could be to avoid criticism and protect oneself or others from punitive measures:

Sometimes teachers may submit reports that lack certain level of truth and transparency to avoid criticism. During course audits, some teachers claimed to have covered entire compulsory syllabus, but we later found chapters which actually were not. We spoke to students who confirmed that certain courses were not delivered properly. This is why we need to course coverage forms to be signed by student representatives, department heads and finally by teachers of the courses. (WS3, 01.10.2018)

The data analysis has uncovered that students tend to positively evaluate those academic staff members whom they consider to be generous when it comes to grading and assessment and often avoid reporting problems and weaknesses in the courses taught by these teachers. There have been examples where the students submitted a positive report regarding course coverage but later submitted complaints to departments that the exams consisted of questions from parts of the syllabus that were not covered in the class. The departments have received complaints from the students around the end of semesters that courses were not entirely covered after avoiding reporting such gaps in earlier periodic course coverage evaluations. In these cases, the internal quality assurance procedures were not able to identify these inconsistencies because student representatives, who are often regarded as a good source of such confirmation, have initially provided misleading reports.

Admas University: Openness driven by commitment to quality improvement

The analysis of the data from the interviews and review of documents suggests the existence of a good culture of honesty and a system of cross-checking the findings of quality evaluations that are supported by the commitment to improving the quality of operations at Admas University. The data show that several factors explain why this is the case. First, there is a tangible institutional commitment to quality and an active involvement and leadership by the university's management in internal quality assurance and enhancement efforts. There is evidence that Admas University is motivated to learn about the status of its quality and improve the standards of the education and research it provides to the public. Whereas other institutions hesitated to undergo evaluation, Admas University was one of the first higher education institutions who invited HERQA to audit its operations shortly after HERQA had been established.

The second factor that explains the university's established practice of relatively honest reporting to internal and external stakeholders is its positive attitude towards internal quality evaluations. It was reported that the internal quality assurance office tends to be seen by internal stakeholders of the university community more as a supportive unit than as a fault-finder, except during the internal audit evaluations that are intended to identify areas that need to be improved ahead of an upcoming external evaluation by HERQA. A respondent added that the internal quality assurance office has 'raised the awareness of the staff during orientations that honest reporting is something that the university does not compromise' (AF1, 05.10.2018).

Third, the well-organised, transparent and consistent system of documentation across all internal units and branch campuses of the university seems to have facilitated the honest and direct reporting of the action taken, the relevant achievements and the gaps in implementation for each of the focus areas of internal quality assurance. Further, the follow ups on meetings and the progress of operations in various areas are properly recorded and communicated. A respondent elaborated the role of the documentation system for openness in the following way:

Quality assurance officers and academic and administrative leaders do not even need to ask staff about task performance because every activity is already documented, and one only needs to pick those documents off the shelf and check the current progress. For example, documents bearing the code 17 at all our branch campuses record activities related to teaching and learning guidelines. We carefully document the progress of each course coverage, attendance of students, the mark list of teachers on student evaluation and other routine teaching and learning activities every week. We

also cross-check the information reported in these documents, for example, by speaking to students and department heads. (AB2, 08.10.2018)

Although the documentation practice seems a little overwhelming and bureaucratic, the respondents argued that it simplifies tasks, supports coordination and ensures the consistency of operations while providing a common working language rather than increasing the workload of the staff. There is a separate guideline for the documentation system itself. Orientations and trainings are used to induct new staff members and familiarise them with navigating through the documentation. This was credited by respondents as having addressed the initial negative attitude of the staff towards quality assurance and having gradually led to them recognising the value and significance of these tools.

The fourth explanation behind the open and honest reporting of quality evaluations can be linked to the fact that Admas University seems to have significant bottom-up initiatives in which departments take part in the planning, implementing and monitoring of the evaluation practices. It was reported that the departments plan and carry out quality assurance activities that respond to their needs. The quality assurance office, together with other administrative units, monitors the implementation of these activities with the help of various checklists and guidelines.

Fifth, Admas University has a unique and well-established practice wherein the performance reports of all academic and administrative units, campuses, colleges and departments of the university are critically evaluated and graded by the university senate every three months. This seems to have played a key role in promoting a culture of open and honest reporting and dialogue about work performance as well as in improving the implementation of annual plans. The procedure involves members of the senate commenting on each report against the plan, units reflecting on their report and proposing grades for their performance, each member of the senate individually either supporting or challenging the proposed grade and, ultimately, the senate voting and endorsing the grade levels of all units according to their performance reports and placing them along a scale that ranges from 'A' to 'F' or 'No Grade' (Tsegay, 2015, pp. 2-3). The units that have accomplished 95 per cent or more of their plans are graded as 'A', those with 90 per cent or above receive an 'A-', while 'F' is given to those that have failed to accomplish 40 per cent of their plans. A respondent reflected on the practice of quarterly evaluating and grading the performance of all units in the following lines:

Our evaluation sessions are a bit tough and honest. It's impossible to report that something has been accomplished if there was nothing done. Interestingly, we also use additional points for self-evaluation where the staff can reflect on such as time

management, whether responsibilities are carried out on own initiation and without the need to be reminded by others, whether reports contain decorated, exaggerated and fabricated information, and whether job tasks are carried out with genuine commitment or just for the sake of reporting. These practices help us improve honest reporting and avoid covering up weaknesses. (AF1, 05.10.2018)

The evaluation has various implications (Tsegay, 2015). First, the units and individuals that performed well in the evaluation are awarded money and certificates as incentives. Second, the outcome of the evaluation also serves as a reference for further promotions and demotions. Third, the evaluation also leads to the revision and enhancement of plans. The grades of the performance evaluation are published openly on the bulletins of the university, such as 'Experience Admas', for transparency purposes.

Moreover, there is frequent communication among the staff working on quality assurance weekly, bi-weekly and monthly, and quarterly reporting and monthly meetings are organised. The researcher observed that the information gathered from the quality assurance officers and members of the senior management regarding Admas University's engagement in quality assurance seems consistent and suggests that the staff at various levels of the university are on the same page regarding what the institution is doing to assure and improve the quality of its operations. They tend to use a common language when describing internal quality assurance efforts, unlike what is observed at the other case higher education institutions.

Regarding openness in its interaction with HERQA, Admas University has been audited twice by HERQA, and the review of the university's annual plans provides evidence to show that, in 2018, the university is still actively implementing the recommendations received from the previous audit in 2009 and integrating development activities into its annual plans. The improvement work undertaken for the areas identified as requiring development extended to revising the vision and mission statements of the university. This shows that quality assurance is taken more seriously at Admas University than at the other studied higher education institutions. The university has prepared a self-evaluation in 2017 and, at the time of data collection, was awaiting external evaluation by HERQA. Furthermore, the president of Admas University is a member of the governing board that oversees HERQA, and the university seems to have a positive relationship with HERQA. A respondent remarked, 'HERQA knows our university from head to toe and is quite familiar with how we see quality and quality assurance' (AF1, 05.10.2018).

Sheba University College: Weak culture of openness, dialogue and critique

The data show Sheba University College lacks structured, periodic and systematic quality evaluation practices, which limits its capacity to identify weaknesses and gaps in the quality of education and experience of departments and their academic staff to conduct frequent critical self-assessment. Moreover, the communication between the quality assurance director and academic staff who are expected to be the frontline implementers of quality assurance is weak. The data indicated that no periodic meetings and follow up discussions on quality assurance were held in management teams or at other levels of the university college. Given such weak periodic communication and evaluation practices, the plan of the quality assurance office to facilitate the remedial action for the identified quality assurance problems raised by students, faculty, departments and various administrative units seems unlikely to be implemented (QAO, 2017b).

The interviews indicated the hesitation of the management to promote open reporting and dialogue about the challenges and issues raised by the staff and students. This suggests that the management may have vested interests in not supporting the development of open discussions, participatory decision-making and dialogues between staff and management. The heavy top-down approach in decision-making seems to have hindered the possibility of having a culture of open discussion and reporting. For example, a respondent commented:

What concerns me is that our management is not interested in supporting student organisations. There seems to be an interest in stifling student voices, concerns raised by staff, and preventing problems from being openly brought up and discussed. There seems to be a perception among our senior management that openness will open a door to more issues and problems. You can further see such tendencies in the fact that our senior management tends to be secretive and closed in its decision-making. The major owners of our university college also hold positions of CEO in the senior management and a vice presidency for business affairs. Most issues are handled by the senior management including the CEO, president and vice presidents, and they do not often get to be discussed by middle management and staff. (SG1, 25.09.2018)

Regarding openness during interactions with HERQA, the respondents argued that deceptions in material resources are unlikely, since Sheba University College has relatively good programme facilities. It was further reported that most academic staff are committed to doing their best to discharge their responsibilities, providing good quality education and openly reporting their shortcomings and the tasks they have failed to undertake. Despite gradually improving material resources and facilities with the support of a German partner, Sheba University College seems to lack academic

staff members who have the knowledge and capacity to utilise and operate these facilities and provide a high-quality practical education to students. The data suggest a questionable commitment of the management to the quality of academic staff. Additionally, a quality assurance officer at the university college reported the existence of tendencies to withhold information related to the institution's perceived weaknesses:

I have noticed tendencies to prevent honest and direct reporting of the qualification and quality of academic staff that our university college has. Our institution struggles to meet requirements on the composition of academic staff with required bachelor's, master's and doctorate qualifications. There is an attempt for this not to be visible to external evaluators from HERQA. (SG1, 25.09.2018)

Such concerns seem to be largely overlooked by the senior management, who maintain that the university college is committed to the open and honest reporting of its strengths and gaps with little fear of the ramifications for their accreditation and reaccreditation permits. They argued that the university college recognises that the external quality evaluations seek evidence from site visits to confirm the contents of the self-evaluation and other documents. A member of the senior management explained these issues in the following way:

It's difficult to deceive HERQA even in the context of accreditation since everything we say in our documents and present to the experts during on-site visit is often cross-checked. The evaluators inspect several inputs to those applications. For example, profile of permanent academic staff is cross-checked with pay roll records and evidence of income tax paid to the Ethiopian Ministry of Revenues and. The team of evaluators also even check the speed of the internet when they assess our ICT facilities. In the meantime, we also recognise that if we hide our weaknesses, we cannot receive recommendations that will support us make improvements. (SH2, 26.09.2018)

Nevertheless, the quality assurance officer, a member of the senior management and the review of sample letters sent by HERQA to the university college suggest that the agency tends to use a more modest, positive and constructive tone of communication than prescriptive and controlling.

Medco Bio-Medical College: Deteriorating relationship with HERQA risks openness

The interview and document data showed that Medco Bio-Medical College has been having a tense, turbulent and deteriorating relationship with HERQA. This was

caused by the failure of the college to meet certain minimum quality standards required for accreditation and reaccreditation permits and the subsequent closure of some of its programmes and a personal quarrel between the owner and president of the college and some experts and leaders from HERQA. The focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA suggest that Medco Bio-Medical College was accused of attempting to engage in dishonest and misleading reporting or deceive the team of evaluators. Nevertheless, a respondent conceded the presence of certain degree of hesitation to openly report gaps in the college's operations:

Our college also tends to hide its weaknesses while doing self-assessments. This is because we have a weak culture and practice of conducting honest and critical evaluation. Experts from HERQA often conduct the site visits which are announced beforehand. This also presents opportunities and challenges for deception. (MBB2, 08.10.2018)

The data indicated that the relationship between the college and HERQA is largely characterised by mutual suspicion and a lack of respect. The respondents from the college repeatedly expressed allegations of being pressured into corruption by some members of the team of evaluators from HERQA.

Additionally, the study found that no staff member of the college directly and meaningfully works on quality assurance, including the individual serving in the position of quality assurance coordinator. The interviews indicated no clear communication among the staff regarding issues related to quality assurance and periodic quality evaluation practices. The current seemingly nominal existence of a quality assurance coordinator and preliminary quality evaluation practices seem to be for the sake of formality and window-dressing. A respondent openly conceded such issues:

What I have done since I was hired as an internal audit officer was to develop questionnaire to collect feedback on the quality of courses from students and teachers every semester. I have done no other activity, but this was done for the purpose of showing to accreditation experts of HERQA that our college was actively working on quality assurance. It was not a genuine work, or an engagement driven by real commitment to improve quality off programmes. We did not continue even this small and insignificant activity related to quality assurance after the visit by the external expert was concluded. The staff supposed to work on quality assurance is in practice fully engaged in teaching. (MBB2, 08.10.2018)

The deteriorating relationship with HERQA and acute lack of tangible engagement in quality assurance practices and procedures seem to endanger the development of periodic evaluations and open and honest reporting at Medco Bio-Medical College.

8.4 Risk to quality and quality assurance

Risk constitutes the fourth key dimension through which trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions can be explored. As discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework, the level of trust a quality assurance agency develops in its engagement with a higher education institution during quality assurance processes can depend on identifying, weighing and voluntarily assuming the risks at stake. The consideration of risks and uncertainties in the relationship between a quality assurance agency and higher education institution encompasses scenarios of what the state of quality in a given institution would be if there were no requirements of accreditations, quality audits and self-evaluations. The understanding of risk also involves understanding the interests of the actors responsible for governing higher education and the aspects that the external regulation they implement aims to achieve, encourage or deter. Risk takes into account whether higher education institutions would voluntarily operate in a responsible manner and remain committed of their own volition to safeguard the quality of the education, research and community service they provide. It would be important to consider the extent to which higher education institutions refrain from operating in ways that adversely affect quality standards or violate the stated quality regulations. Accordingly, it is argued that trust can develop when the risks and uncertainties regarding quality and the wellbeing of stakeholders remain relatively low or moderate, thereby creating less need for external regulation. The propensity to trust is reduced and need for regulation is increased if the risks at stake are perceived to be high.

In the sections below, the study presents findings from the analysis of the data gathered from focus group discussions, interviews and relevant national and institutional documents on the issue of the perceived risks for quality and quality assurance in the consideration of trust between HERQA and higher education institutions.

8.4.1 Perceived risks to quality standards and quality assurance

The data showed that all the respondents who participated in the study share the view that the quality of higher education has been falling amidst the rapid expansion of enrolment in higher education which has been taking place in both the public and private sectors since the early 2000s. It was argued that the Ethiopian higher

education system is challenged by acute quality concerns related to the increasing number of higher education institutions, shortage of funding, scarcity of qualified and competent academic staff, deficiencies in learning resources and facilities, traditional teaching and learning methods, quality of programmes and student learning and increasing rate of graduate unemployment. The scale of these concerns, as the research data showed, tend to be perceived as being higher at private higher education institutions than public institutions.

Besides the currently declining quality standards, respondents reiterated that the existing external and internal quality assurance mechanisms have been inadequate for effectively rescuing and improving the quality standards as expected. The quality assurance system has been criticised for being bureaucratic, rigid and inadequately resourced to address the complex and dynamics challenges that the quality of higher education has faced. The existing dichotomous quality assurance requirements for public and private higher education institutions have remained a source of criticism, controversy and questions regarding fairness. The respondents acknowledged the positive roles that external and internal quality assurance procedures have played in raising awareness about quality and standards, introducing quality audits and accreditation, requiring higher education institutions to take responsibility for internally monitoring and enhancing quality, supporting the progress towards meeting minimum quality standards, guarding against fraudulent private higher education institutions and protecting the interests of internal and external stakeholders.

The respondents from HERQA argued that the quality of higher education would be far worse than it currently is if the external instruments of regulation and the procedures and requirements of quality assurance implemented by HERQA and the Ministry of Education did not exist. These concerns are rooted in the perceived weak self-restraint and intrinsic motivation associated with the responsible operation of higher education institutions. It is argued that the current status of quality standards in higher education, however unsatisfactory it has been in the past, would likely have not been prevented from declining further without the establishment of HERQA in 2003 and the external quality evaluations, such as accreditations and audits, it has been conducting at higher education institutions. Further, some progress is said to be made by the introduction of the internal quality assurance requirements at higher education institutions.

The discussion previously presented on the issues related to openness however showed the prevalence of dishonest reporting, deception and the violation of regulations for quality among higher education institutions, which are particularly

widespread and acute among the private institutions more than their public counterparts. The respondents from HERQA are largely aware of the common deception tactics employed by higher education institutions related to programme facilities, academic and administrative staff, programme curriculum and course modules, students and other key requirements of the minimum quality standards.

The data suggest that, in the scenario that HERQA would entrust higher education institutions with the responsibility of safeguarding quality standards with no external quality evaluations, the risks to quality, which would otherwise be addressed through accreditations, would likely be more pronounced than the aspects of operations that are assessed through institutional and programme audits. For example, a respondent clarified the differences with respect to the perceived risks between the two types of external evaluations in the following lines:

The risks are different for audit and accreditation. Without audits, higher education institutions would have little familiarity and experience of conducting institutional and programme level self-evaluations. But without accreditation, the standards of education, interests of stakeholders and wellbeing of society would be at grave danger. Accreditation is absolutely critical. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

There exist minimum quality standards that are essential for the healthy functioning of higher education institutions. The above arguments indicate that the risks to these standards, which accreditations aim to avert, would likely be more concerning to HERQA and other external regulators, such as the Ministry of Education, than a hindrance to the progress in enhancing quality, which audit evaluations are designed to address.

8.4.2 Risks to responsible operation and extent of self-restraint

The respondents interviewed in this study described a largely negative scenario that, without external quality regulations, most higher education institutions in Ethiopia currently lack the intrinsic commitment and motivation to proactively address quality concerns and strive to ensure the quality standards of their education, research and community service for stakeholders¹²². These shared views seem to have led respondents from HERQA, public and private higher education institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers and

¹²² The respondents of the focus group discussion laughed at the question, before sharing their views, about the scenarios of what the state of quality at higher education institutions could be if there would be no requirements for accreditations, quality audits and self-evaluations enforced by HERQA.

experts in the area of quality assurance to conclude that higher education institutions cannot be trusted by HERQA or other external stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Education and other branches of government, to operate responsibly and safeguard quality standards.

There can be several explanations for this. First, higher education institutions lack adequate experience with exercising institutional autonomy and self-regulation given the fact that the education sector in general and higher education in particular has a long history of being mainly led by governments since the imperial administration. Such a context means that Ethiopian higher education is rooted in a government-oriented system where successive governments provided budgets and human and material resources, assigned students centrally, formulated legislative frameworks, established regulative and accountability mechanisms, set development policy priorities and agendas and prescribed management tools and models to higher education institutions, particularly to public higher education institutions. Second, quality assurance is a relatively recent phenomenon in Ethiopian higher education, and the country's higher education institutions are a long way from having a deeper understanding of quality issues and developing robust internal practices and processes of quality assurance. The higher education institutions rely on HERQA for technical and professional assistance and guidance on issues related to quality and quality assurance and on its mandates for enforcing regulations to maintain order and accountability in the sector. This further underlines the significance of HERQA's responsibility of periodically 'evaluating whether the relevance and quality of the enhancement system of institutions are capable of ensuring quality in higher education' (FDRE, 2009, Art. 89 [4]). Third, the widespread deception, dishonest reporting and violation of regulations by higher education institutions (substantially more by private institutions than public ones) and the growing awareness about such practices have created a suspicious, distrustful and cautious attitude among HERQA, Ministry of Education and other governmental stakeholders towards higher education institutions. This is argued to have likely eroded the foundations for the development of a relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions based on mutual trust. A respondent from HERQA expressed this distrust, which was openly shared by the other participants of the focus group discussions in the following way:

Many private institutions who failed to meet minimum requirements set for educational facilities and resources plead with us to make concessions on defined input standards. We always say a minimum standard does not have yet another minimum. Do we think such institutions can be trusted to safeguard quality on their

own without us policing them? No way! Quality of education could collapse beyond recovery. (HAUT2, 03.10.2018)

Fourth, the respondents reiterated the lack of strong societal values and moral codes that would facilitate quality, integrity and responsibility, which is argued to have weakened the self-restraint of higher education institutions and reiterated the necessity of external regulations. The quality culture is yet to permeate most higher education institutions. The respondents from HERQA expressed a rather negative outlook and experience of the value systems of most higher education institutions, structures of the labour market and the broader society, which are all argued to have weakened the expectations for intrinsic commitment to upholding high quality. The following excerpt taken from a focus group discussion provides an insight into the perceived challenges related to value system:

It's unfortunate that our society don't value quality. The moral and value of our society seems to be not in the best interest of motivating individuals to strive for quality and honest hard work. People often look for shortcuts in life. Employers only focus on degree papers and qualifications, and people care less about quality if they would have shortcut access to these credentials, which would open their access to employment. Our public civil service seems to focus on documents and qualifications such as whether an applicant has a bachelor's or master's degree rather than assessing the acquired knowledge, skill and competence. People think that they are able to access jobs, achieve promotion and earn good salary if they have the right degrees. This has fuelled the selling of degree papers at many irresponsible private institutions. This is why accreditation permits are needed to serve the purpose of controlling and regulating institutions and the higher education sector. Without them, it won't be possible to safeguard and protect interests of society. For this reason, accreditation needs to be strengthened further. The only scenario I can imagine that it may be feasible to abandon accreditation and audit evaluations is under the circumstance where we have managed to develop cultural standards that value, recognise and safeguard quality, and where employers put in place mechanisms to recruit human resources on the basis of knowledge and competence than on degrees and qualifications. (HACC1, 04.10.2018)

These viewpoints draw attention to the value system that exists within higher education institutions and the broader socio-cultural issues that play a significant role in shaping the extent of their self-restraint and responsible operation. The respondents further argued that a scenario wherein they believe it could be feasible to abandon accreditation and audit evaluations is where strong cultural standards that value, recognise and safeguard quality have been developed at the system and institutional levels.

Fifth, the profit orientation of private higher education institutions has remained a significant source of concern for quality. Moreover, the respondents argued that the scale of the problem would likely get exacerbated if HERQA was to entrust higher education institutions with the responsibility of safeguarding quality standards in the absence of accreditations and audit evaluations. The research data found that most respondents from HERQA, higher education institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers shared the view that one of the motivations behind the establishment of HERQA was the need to control and regulate private higher education institutions. During the focus group discussion with the team of quality audit experts from HERQA, a respondent highlighted the scale of the challenge that could arise in the absence of external quality regulation by HERQA:

I think majority of higher education institutions would never operate responsibly on their own without external quality regulation by HERQA. It would be unthinkable, particularly in the private sector. Their orientation towards profit maximisation would be unrestrained, and this would seriously jeopardise quality of education and wellbeing of the society. It's already difficult now let alone imagining what would happen without such evaluation practices. In fact, what the current situation calls for is more stringent monitoring. (HAUT2, 03.10.2018)

Other respondents added:

If HERQA did not accredit private institutions, they would be selling degrees just like shops do groceries. Students will pay and easily get their degrees. It means quality would be left at the mercy of such irresponsible institutions whom we have frequently seen prioritising business goals over academic responsibilities. Many institutions are still abusing the gaps in external quality regulations and would continue to do so to an extent that things could get out of control. Policing these institutions is necessity to contain the vulnerability of stakeholders and the public. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

Look at how deteriorated the status of quality in higher education has become even when we have accreditation and audit practices in place. In short, if there were no external quality evaluations, it would be like? Imagine an open market where you can buy onion and tomato. Degree certificates would have been sold like that. (HACC1, 04.10.2018)

These explanations underscore the anticipation of high risks to quality and quality assurance at higher education institutions for a scenario where higher education institutions are expected to monitor and assure the quality of the services they render to internal and external stakeholders without the external enforcement of the requirements of the minimum standards set by HERQA. The data showed that respondents however acknowledged the existence of a few exceptional public and

private higher education institutions that have demonstrated a strong intrinsic commitment to upholding high quality standards and are likely to continue to take quality seriously, operate responsibly and strive to address the interests of stakeholders without external audits and accreditations by HERQA. There seems to be more confidence in their institutional will to adhere to regulations for programme facilities, academic staff, admission, progression and graduation of students, curriculum and other programme documents. This suggests a scant likelihood of having fewer acute risks to the status of quality education and responsible self-regulation of higher education institutions.

8.4.3 Risks to consistency in operations

In addition to the risks to the quality of higher education, the respondents argued that the absence of external quality evaluations by HERQA would likely create a vacuum for inconsistencies in the development, implementation and evaluation practices of education at higher education institutions, which would gradually increase. It is argued that the standards of the degree programmes, admission criteria for students, qualifications of academic staff, structure and requirements of courses, standards of learning outcomes, teaching-learning and assessment approaches, graduate profiles, qualifications issued and other important aspects of education would likely and increasingly become inconsistent across higher education institutions. The standards of the programmes and degrees would be ‘highly erratic’ and ‘unreliable’ (HAUT3, 03.10.2018). The assessment of quality against set national standards could lack a clear structure, coordination and consistency.

More inconsistencies are predicted to occur between higher education institutions in understanding the meaning of quality, identifying the quality concerns and focus areas for internal quality assurance and developing and employing instruments of quality assurance. The respondents anticipated the difficulty of finding a common language at the national and institutional levels for dialogue, research and practice in quality assurance for higher education. The external quality evaluations conducted by HERQA, such as audits and accreditations, although not enough, are increasingly seen as eye-openers that illustrate the current status of the quality of higher education institutions in relation to the desired quality targets and areas that need improvement. The respondents reiterated that higher education institutions would lack an adequate awareness and understanding of where they stand, in which direction they should proceed and how to reach their targets without external quality evaluations. Such

arguments underscore the need for regulation and the monitoring of the activities of higher education institutions against national goals and expected standards.

8.4.4 Less perceived risks at public higher education institutions

The analysis of the data gathered from the focus group discussions, interviews and documents found that a majority of respondents anticipate that the risks to quality and quality assurance, in the absence of the external quality regulations enforced by HERQA, would likely be moderate at public higher education institutions, while a high number of risks and uncertainties were associated with private institutions. In fact, the data clearly showed that HERQA has minimal interaction with public higher education institutions, unlike its frequent accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations at private institutions. At the time of data collection in October 2018, many respondents reiterated that HERQA had already discontinued conducting institutional and programme level quality audits—the only type of external quality assessment public institutions are subjected to¹²³—at both public and private higher education institutions for more than a year, since 2017, for various reasons¹²⁴. This shows that the current reality of the relationship between HERQA and public higher education institutions is consistent with the theoretical scenario wherein a quality assurance agency entrusts expectations for the self-regulation of standards and maintenance of quality to higher education institutions with little direct external regulation and evaluation of the fulfilment of these expectations. This indicates that the theoretical scenario has been practically implemented by HERQA at public higher education institutions for more than a year. This suggests that HERQA tends to perceive little or moderate risk associated with abandoning external quality evaluations at public institutions. It also highlights HERQA's willingness to assume this risk instead of maintaining external regulations. This perception seems to downplay and disregard the commonly cited quality problems at public institutions. Meanwhile, HERQA has fully concentrated its operational capacity on carrying out accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations at private institutions, although quality audits have been discontinued at these institutions as well. This operational strategy is largely consistent with the high risk associated with leaving such institutions substantially unregulated, HERQA's firm unwillingness to assume such risk and a

¹²³ As previously indicated, private higher education institutions are subjected to audits and accreditation evaluations, whereas public institutions are only required to undergo quality audits.

¹²⁴ This issue is discussed in detail in Chapter Nine, under section 9.2.3.

need to increase the monitoring of the minimum quality standards at private institutions.

As such, the increasing association of less and, at the most, moderate risks to the quality of higher education at public institutions seems to stem from the attitude of positively perceiving public organisations. Public higher education institutions are generally regarded by the respondents from HERQA as being established for the purpose of serving society and facilitating national development. These institutions are considered to be free from a profit orientation, to function responsibly, to operate in line with clear civil service rules and regulations and to be subjected to various accountability instruments. Public higher education institutions, as discussed in section 8.1, have minimal business interests for providing their services to the public, as they are funded and managed by the government. The absence of a profit orientation was argued to significantly reduce the risk of public institutions intentionally undercutting quality to minimise costs and increase profit margins by amassing and enrolling ineligible students, as well as delivering courses with underqualified academic staff, insufficient learning facilities and programme curricula.

The data from the focus group discussions and interviews indicates a sense of in-group sentiments among the respondents from HERQA towards public higher education institutions. These respondents tend to see both HERQA and public higher education institutions as public organisations and as having similar funding and accountability structures. They recognise that both are funded by the government and are accountable to the Ministry of Education. This tendency of regarding themselves as belonging to the same category of public organisations that serve society seems to have facilitated a degree of complacency among the respondents from HERQA when it comes to assessing the current status and possible risks to quality at public higher education institutions. This manner of thinking seems to externalise, alienate and critically perceive private higher education institutions. The application of the stringent accreditation and reaccreditation permit evaluations only for private institutions can be understood as a reflection of how HERQA and, including the Ministry of Education, alienates and cautiously transacts with them.

Additionally, the discussion below presents the perceived risks identified by the respondents associated with the public higher education institutions included in this study in a scenario where HERQA would rely on them to regulate and safeguard the quality of their own operations accompanied by a less direct external quality evaluation by HERQA. It is important to note that, as indicated earlier in this section,

the data showed that the respondents from HERQA tend to associate different levels of risks to public and private higher education institutions. This suggests that, for most respondents, the legal status of higher education institutions seems to be more important for assessing risks than the specific identity of each institution selected from these two sectors of higher education. The case of Admas University however presents an exception to such perceptions.

At Mekelle University, the data indicated risks to the current progress achieved in internal quality assurance due to the lack of initiative and inconsistent commitment at the grassroots level despite an intention to utilise quality assurance to increase the university's visibility and support the improvement of its education, research and community service. There seems to be a desire to properly adhere to and practice self-restraint to avoid violating the regulations and guidelines issued by HERQA. Internally, the respondents argued that quality issues would hardly be openly discussed and addressed by departments and their academic staff without the initiatives implemented by the internal quality assurance office of the university. The existence of the office is crucial for facilitating awareness, dialogue and addressing quality challenges throughout the university. The current progress in quality assurance is anticipated to likely revert to a worse condition without the practice of institutional- and programme-level self-evaluations carried out by the internal quality assurance office and the external audits conducted by HERQA. The interview data conveys the concerns of the respondents that the attention given to quality may gradually decline, and the quality standards at the university may eventually fall. The respondents argued that the departments could be less likely to take the initiative to monitor and assess the quality of their operations if the university- and college-level quality assurance offices and the directives of HERQA did not exist. This is further explained by the frequent challenges that mainly stem from the lack of commitment and delays in implementation commonly encountered when undertaking programme audits at the university. This suggests that the current progress with internal quality audit practices would be unlikely without the efforts of the internal quality assurance office for raising awareness, providing support frequently reminding and following-up with departments. Abandoning external and internal quality assurance practices would likely lead to Mekelle University being deprived of the opportunity to tangibly respond to the growing pressure to rescue quality.

Similarly, the scenario of the absence of external quality regulation by HERQA, and the Ministry of Education, is associated with the risks of further deterioration occurring in the quality of the education provided by Wollo University. The respondents expressed their concern that without external and internal quality

evaluations, the quality of Wollo University's core activities could likely decline further into a worrisome status. Identifying its strengths and areas that need development would be difficult and challenging without quality assurance evaluations. It was argued that the lack of systematic mechanisms for assessing the standards of teaching could lead to a situation where some teachers and departments deliver programmes properly, mostly due to individual initiation, while others may continue to record inconsistent and poor performance with respect to providing education. Despite indications that Wollo University recognises the gravity of the quality problems in education, the data from interviews and documents shows that it has considerable gaps in terms of the knowledge, experience, commitment, attitude and ethical integrity that are needed to address quality challenges internally. In fact, the respondents remarked that higher education institutions, including Wollo University and its colleges and departments, would be unlikely to operate responsibly and safeguard the quality of education without external and internal quality assurance regulations. This could give rise to irregularities and a lack of accountability in the operations of the university. Moreover, interviews identified the risk that the internal quality monitoring practices at Wollo University, without the regulation and coordination of HERQA, could become inconsistent with the practices employed at other higher education institutions. Such accounts seem to highlight the need for HERQA and the Ministry of Education to exercise more regulations and evaluations for public universities, considering them as institutions that are financed by public resources and holding them against national goals and expected standards.

The analysis of the data gathered from Woldia University shows that the respondents identified significant potential risks to the quality of the academic services that the university provides to the public if HERQA would rely on the university to regulate its quality on its own and withdraw formal external quality evaluations. The risks to the quality standards are anticipated to be higher than the scope and threat of the existing quality problems that Woldia University is facing. The respondents argued that the quality of education has declined despite the establishment of internal quality assurance procedures aimed at mitigating the complex quality challenges that arise from the rapid increase in enrolment at Woldia University. However, the presence of external quality evaluations, such as audits by HERQA, are useful for reminding colleges and departments at Woldia University about the need to ensure that quality standards are sufficiently met and to prevent further deterioration in quality. In the scenario that such evaluations are withdrawn, Woldia University could be exposed to serious quality concerns. This is further explained by the current inadequate attention given by the university to the

implementation of quality assurance, the structural problems of its internal quality assurance and inadequate resources allocated to the structure, the weak training and capacity-building opportunities for the staff members working on quality assurance and the weak practice of openness at the grassroots level despite an intention to achieve strategic objectives through quality. The university has a limited capacity for implementing and fulfilling the quality standards approved by HERQA and the Ministry of Education. The interview data suggest that the status of quality and engagement in internal quality assurance at Woldia University would likely face significant challenges, but less risk was associated with the capacity of the university to refrain from violating regulations for quality. Moreover, the respondents noted that HERQA currently does not actively engage and follow up with public higher education institutions, including Woldia University. For example, the interviews indicated that HERQA has still not sent the feedback of the university's first institutional audit that was conducted more than two years after the site visit was undertaken in 2016.

8.4.5 High perceived risks at private higher education institutions

As discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, the profit orientation of private higher education institutions is seen to be the root cause and source of quality concerns and a seemingly perpetual suspicion and distrust by HERQA, the Ministry of Education and other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders with regard to the governance and quality assurance of higher education in Ethiopia. The respondents emphasised that closely regulating the private higher education sector is a necessity, and, in its absence, private institutions would be uninhibited in their pursuit of business objectives at the expense of their academic duties. In fact, the data indicated widespread tendencies of focusing on maximising profit through operations that compromise and, at times, disregard the minimum quality requirements for several years despite the implementation of HERQA's accreditations, sudden visits and audits. The scenario of less external quality regulation by HERQA was strongly associated by the respondents to higher education likely becoming an ordinary investment, driven predominantly by a desire to generate profit than the motivation to provide quality services to society and benefit financially in the process. Such problems are projected to worsen and give rise to more complex issues that could adversely impact the value of higher education and qualifications, quality and employability of graduates and positions and

legitimacy of higher education institutions in society. In the focus group discussion with the team of quality audit experts from HERQA, a respondent described the high perceived risk associated with the scenario as follows:

There are a lot of challenges and irregularities even now when HERQA is actively monitoring and guarding the higher education sector like the police. If there was no requirement for accreditation, the private higher education sector would have become an easy money-making investment opportunity for investors who may have little academic motivation and serving society. In short, many hotels who face bankruptcy in our country would have been turned into private colleges. This is likely to happen because the demand for higher education is high, and enrolment ratio at national level is still at 12 per cent, which is far behind the targeted 23 per cent for 2025. (HAUT5, 03.10.2018)

Similarly, the following excerpt taken from the focus group discussion with the team of accreditation experts from HERQA reiterates the risk that the respondents associate with reducing the regulation of private higher education institutions beyond the current relatively stringent approach:

There are many private institutions which see higher education as a one-time business with no plan for continuous operation. Such institutions are a huge threat to the quality of education because they would not be deterred from violating regulations to make as maximum profit in a short time until they are caught, and later shift to another business. (HACC2, 04.10.2018)

In addition to the complex challenges that arise from having a profit orientation, the respondents from HERQA associate the high risks to quality at private institutions with the argument that most private institutions operating in the Ethiopian higher education sector lack the institutional commitment to ensuring quality and sufficient awareness about the ramifications of undercutting minimum quality standards, violating the major regulations governing quality standards and endangering the interests of internal and external stakeholders. In the focus group discussions, the respondents from HERQA expressed immense doubt that private higher education institutions would practice proper self-restraint if the accreditation and reaccreditation requirements were to be lifted. Moreover, the shared experiences of these respondents with the prevalent deception, dishonest reporting and the violation of regulations that occurs among private higher education institutions evidently heightens the scale and threat of the perceived risks. This opinion was also shared by the respondents from the case higher education institutions, including those from the private institutions themselves, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers and experts from the area of quality assurance

in Ethiopian higher education. It was argued that, in the absence of the accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations by HERQA, deceiving stakeholders and violating regulations would likely develop into a norm at private higher education institutions, and they could increasingly rely on such malpractices to achieve financial success. A respondent further suggested that the absence or removal of the accreditation and reaccreditation requirements can entice private institutions, including reputable ones, to neglect and reduce their efforts aimed at ensuring the minimum quality standards:

Without accreditation, it would be impossible to stop even those private institutions that currently have positive reputation for commitment to quality from compromising quality and engaging in mischievous activities. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

The data clearly indicated the lack of willingness on the part of HERQA, and the Ministry of Education, to voluntarily assume the high perceived risk associated with leaving the quality of private higher education institutions unregulated, unlike in the case of public institutions. This emphasises HERQA's view that the risks of trusting private higher education institutions with quality and quality assurance are perceived to be substantially higher than the likelihood of these institutions operating responsibly and practicing self-regulation and of potential positive outcomes arising from such institutional development. The development of trust, however, requires an actor to identify and willingly assume the risks associated with entrusting its expectations to another actor. Accordingly, this fundamental ingredient for the development of trust seems to be missing in the context of the relationship between HERQA and private institutions.

The general discussion about the risks to quality and quality assurance involved in the relationship between HERQA and private higher education institutions is further explored briefly in the analysis of the data gathered from each private institution included in this study, namely Admas University, Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College. This is expected to provide more insight into cases where high and less perceived risks could be associated with higher education institutions belonging to the same legal status. These nuances could reveal the importance of the perceived institutional commitment and the history and development of the relationship between an institution and HERQA.

The data showed that respondents from HERQA associate considerably less risk to the quality of operations and implementation of quality assurance at Admas University than at the other private higher education institutions included in this

study¹²⁵. They seem to think that Admas University, based on its current reputation for taking quality seriously and operating responsibly, would likely continue to refrain from violating regulations and grossly compromising the minimum quality standards set by HERQA and the Ministry of Education. These respondents have expressed their admiration for the commitment of Admas University to excelling in quality assurance by extending their efforts beyond the requirements it has set for private higher education institutions. The university strives to implement all the guidelines issued by HERQA and document the activities undertaken so that they can be assessed later. The focus group discussion and interviews suggest a growing shared outlook of HERQA, the Ministry of Education and other non-governmental stakeholders involved in quality assurance that Admas University has gradually developed from a small training centre to a full-fledged university by placing an emphasis on improving its institutional capacity and quality standards and enhancing its visibility and attractiveness. However, the respondents expressed their concern that a complete adherence to the minimum quality standards may be difficult to achieve even at reputable private higher education institutions such as Admas University. For example, it is argued that many private institutions often exceed the number of students allowed for each programme as specified in the accreditation and reaccreditation permits granted by HERQA.

At Sheba University College, however, the data analysis indicated that the quality of education would likely decline further in the absence of the external quality regulations conducted by HERQA. The quality of the teaching and learning processes, including admission of students, course coverage, student assessment, qualification of academic staff, requirements for graduation and learning facilities, were considered by the respondents to be the areas that would likely drop in terms of standards and consistency of operations. The risks to quality and quality assurance seem to be reinforced by the strategic emphasis that Sheba University College places on commercial success and profitability, reliance on an inadequate single-person structure for internal quality assurance, the scarcity of resources and the lack of commitment to allocating more resources for quality assurance-related activities, and a weak culture of openness, dialogue and critical reflection. The respondents from the university college conceded that there used to be problems associated with violating regulations in the past, such as cases where students who have not met the national entry criteria for higher education were admitted into programmes, but

¹²⁵ The researcher also observed that the manner and tone in which the respondents from HERQA spoke about Admas University seem to be at par and, at times, superior to how they described concerns, capacity, openness and risks with regard to public higher education institutions.

claimed that things have improved gradually. The reports extend to instances where students were enrolled with forged certificates of work experience, since enrolling into degree programmes immediately after graduating from a TVET institute is prohibited unless the applicant has a certain amount of work experience. These reports imply that the improvements regarding paying more attention to the regulations could be linked to the realisation of the university college that its accreditation and reaccreditation permits would be revoked if caught having violated such regulations rather than out of genuine and strong commitment for quality.

However, the respondents from Sheba University College claim that the institution understands its responsibility to produce competent citizens and would not change the way it operates if HERQA's accreditation and reaccreditation requirements did not exist. These claims that the university college takes regulations for quality assurance seriously and conducts follow ups to ensure no regulation is violated seem less convincing and tangible given the image the institution has among the accreditation experts from HERQA. These respondents from HERQA, who participated in the focus group discussions, tend to describe Sheba University College as belonging to the category of private higher education institutions that have weak tangible commitment to the quality of education and those who would be unlikely to refrain from abusing regulations and undercutting requirements regarding minimum quality standards if accreditation and audit evaluations by HERQA were to be withdrawn. This implies that Sheba University College, similar to many private institutions who are dedicated primarily to making profits, could likely harm and endanger the quality of education if safeguarding the minimum quality standards was to be entrusted to the institution with no formal external regulation of quality. The interview data suggest that the management of the university college, which monitors its daily activities, is faced with the difficult task of balancing the business side of operations with the institutional responsibilities of quality education, often with inadequate support from the owners of the institution.

Moreover, the respondents from HERQA expressed their concern that Medco Bio-Medical College could further descend into considerable quality problems without HERQA's regulation and inspection. It seems that the closure of Medco Bio-Medical College's programmes in 2016 and the subsequent tension and evidently deteriorating relationship with HERQA's leadership and experts seem to be a reminder of the quality problems and unmet minimum quality requirements at the college. The respondents from HERQA seem to view the college with a general sense of suspicion and unease, and it could take a long time for tensions to relax and mutual trust to be built between the college and HERQA. The staff of Medco Bio-

Medical College seem to have resentment towards HERQA. They argue that the agency has put the college under pressure, which resulted in the disruption and rapid weakening of its operations. Interestingly, the respondents stressed the necessity of subjecting private higher education institutions, including Medco Bio-Medical College, to systematic external regulation and monitoring to confirm that they are operating properly and meeting the expected goals and interests of the stakeholders and to help the institutions identify the aspects they need to improve.

8.5 Perceived barriers for higher education institutions to trust HERQA

As indicated in the theoretical and analytical framework, the study, to a limited extent, reflects on mutual trust to gain an insight into how higher education institutions may assess the trustworthiness of quality assurance agencies. Accordingly, the data analysis found that higher education institutions in Ethiopia seem to have a relatively low trust in HERQA, its approaches, capacity and autonomy, and the professionalism of its experts. The degree of this trust problem seems to be relatively higher for private higher education institutions than for public institutions. The subsequent sections briefly discuss these issues.

8.5.1 Dichotomous quality regulations

The data show that the respondents from the studied public and private higher education institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers from the domain of quality assurance all criticise the dichotomous external quality assurance requirement implemented by HERQA. This requirement subjects public higher education institutions to an institutional quality audit, whereas private higher education institutions are required to undergo an institutional quality audit and programme accreditation evaluations. Accordingly, HERQA tightly regulates quality standards at private higher education institutions while it relaxes its control over their public counterparts. HERQA more actively sanctions and takes measures against private institutions, for instance, based on the outcomes of accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations, but lacks a similar approach to public institutions. The higher education proclamation, in contrast, does not explicitly stipulate such a dissimilar approach for public and private institutions.

As the interviews with the selected researchers and experts from the field of quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education, non-governmental stakeholders and the Education Strategy Centre all indicated, the dichotomous requirements and regulatory approaches arise from the interpretation of the provisions of the proclamation and the way they are translated into action by HERQA (also argued in Nega, 2017).

The data collected from the case private higher education institutions and the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions Association suggests the presence of a feeling of being targeted, untrusted and controlled by HERQA within the community of private higher education institutions. As shown in previous studies, the dichotomy has raised questions regarding the fairness, operational objectivity and credibility of HERQA (Geda, 2014; Nega, 2017). Private higher education institutions argued that such differential regulation instruments prevent them from competing on equal terms with their public counterparts for incoming students (Nega, 2017). All the respondents, including those from HERQA, mostly acknowledged the largely unfair and divisive nature of the differential treatments of higher education institutions operating within the two sectors. The dichotomous approach was regarded by most respondents as a double standard that needs to be abolished. This would enable the development of a unified and balanced quality assurance system that could be applied similarly across all higher education institutions and reduce the mutual suspicion and resentment between HERQA and private higher education institutions. The Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions Association has been advocating for the revision or abolishment of the dichotomy in quality assurance requirements between public and private higher education institutions. This change seems unlikely, at least in the near future, despite efforts by the Association, stakeholders, researchers and practitioners from the field. There seems to be hesitation and a lack of political will from the Ministry of Education and HERQA to realise this much-demanded and awaited revision.

8.5.2 Dubious autonomy and conflict of interest

The data from the interviews conducted with the respondents from the case higher education institutions, Education Strategy Centre and non-governmental stakeholders and the selected researchers questions and criticises HERQA's lack of meaningful organisational, managerial and operational autonomy despite its establishment by higher education proclamation (351/2003) as an autonomous

entity (FDRE, 2003, Art. 78 [1]). Its considerable dependence on federal government funding, accountability to the Ministry of Education, government-controlled governance structure (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science and Technology chairing the governing board), direct appointment of directors and regulation by the civil service commission are identified to be some of the critical factors that constrain the credibility of HERQA as an autonomous or semi-autonomous entity (Geda, 2014). In such a case, the quality evaluation of public higher education institutions, that are funded by the government and centrally administered by the Ministry, being carried out by HERQA, which also relies on government funding and is accountable to the Ministry, could be seen as being equivalent to the Ministry evaluating itself (also implied in Salmi et al., 2017). Similarly, the review of HERQA by a panel of international experts also identified such conflicts of interest (Henson et al., 2016). The case in point, the following excerpt taken from an interview provides an insight into the image that HERQA has among higher education institutions:

When HERQA visited our university, we have raised a question about how independent they are from the Ministry in carrying out their activities. There is a widespread perception in our college that HERQA does not have a strong ability to thoroughly assess, identify weaknesses and provide appropriate solutions. We believe that HERQA is subordinate to the Ministry, which makes us think that the agency may simply focus on reporting positive findings according to the wishes of the ministry. (MKC2, 24.09.2018)

The focus group discussions with the audit experts from HERQA further implicated the interference of certain government officials and officers from the Ministry of Education in HERQA's decision-making regarding accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations of some private higher education institutions and the sanctions it issues. In some cases, such interferences are claimed to have resulted in sanctions being overturned without the awareness or consent of HERQA. Another respondent at a case private higher education institution further highlighted issues of autonomy and conflict of interest:

HERQA should first improve its credibility. This is because many believe that its experts lack the confidence to make independent judgement on quality evaluations due to lack of autonomy from the Ministry. This is a major issue since it is the Ministry who provides the budget for HERQA and hires its staff. I think HERQA is under pressure to submit pleasant reports to the Ministry. HERQA must become independent of the structure and influence of the Ministry. It should be financially self-sufficient. This could put an end to HERQA only singing the songs that the Ministry wishes to listen to. HERQA should first build its confidence and take more decisive measures and sanctions. (SG1, 25.09.2018)

The self-evaluation of HERQA explicitly acknowledged the need for improvement in its governance structure, decision-making, resources and evaluation practices and methods (HERQA, 2011a). Stakeholders have continued to criticise HERQA's weak enforcement of regulations for public higher education institutions as being, among other things, a manifestation of the prevailing conflict of interest that emanates from HERQA's lack of autonomy and the influence of the Ministry of Education and other state machineries (Salmi et al., 2017). In terms of desirable characteristics, external quality assurance agencies are expected to demonstrate independent, impartial and fair decision-making (Woodhouse, 2004).

8.5.3 Capacity limitation of the agency

The data uncovered the capacity limitations that HERQA with regard to conducting timely, continuous and frequent evaluations and providing constructive feedback to higher education institutions. A respondent stated, 'I think it's not possible to say that HERQA is operating as an effective gatekeeper and protector of quality' (WD1, 01.10.2018). HERQA is frequently criticised for failing to effectively enforce its mandates to supervise the relevance and quality of higher education in Ethiopia as entrusted to it by the relevant legislations (Kahsay, 2012; Lodesso, 2012). As the data collected from the focus group discussions suggests, the respondents from HERQA mainly attribute the capacity limitation to the shortage of adequately qualified, competent and experienced personnel at HERQA. These respondents cited the high turnover, relatively demanding recruitment criteria and the inadequate salary scale and benefit package applicable to the staff of HERQA as the key obstacles to attracting and retaining high-calibre experts. The lack of systematic and continuous capacity-building and training mechanisms at HERQA was argued to have added to these challenges. Although HERQA actively accredits all private higher education institutions, Geda (2014, p. 310) claims that the agency has only managed to audit 20 per cent of all public higher education institutions as of 2012/13 due to the acute constraints in its capacity for addressing the entire higher education system¹²⁶. A review of HERQA's roles and functions by a panel of international experts showed an estimation of the HERQA's workload per quality audit, accreditation and reaccreditation in the following way (Henson et al., 2016, pp. 11-13):

¹²⁶ This suggests that HERQA interacts more with private higher education institutions than public ones.

The audit team consists of 5 members (2 from HERQA and 3 external reviewers). The duration of the site visit is 1 day (briefing and checking by HERQA) and a 4 day on-site assessment by the team. The RT [Review Team], in conjunction with HERQA staff, estimate that the HERQA workload per audit is approximately 30 person-days (preparation, participation and report writing). Consequently, one HERQA staff FTE [Full Time Employee] can undertake 6 audits a year. There are currently around 140 institutions¹²⁷ and the audit cycle is five years. This implies that 28 institutions must be audited per annum. [...] HERQA's workload per accreditation is about 15 person-days (preparation, participation and report writing). This means that one HERQA FTE can do about 13 accreditations a year. With a staff of 13 FTE¹²⁸ this mean around 170 accreditations a year, not leaving time for any re-accreditation activities or any of the other duties – such as authentication and equivalence – that fall on this directorate. The RT notes that, at the time of the visit, there were some 230 applications for accreditation/reaccreditation in process. [...] HERQA's workload per re-accreditation is about 4 working weeks per a FTE.

In addition to shortage of staff, the relevance of the academic background and experience of the experts employed at HERQA with regard to successfully discharging the responsibilities of overseeing the quality and relevance of higher education has been questioned (Abebe, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Yirdaw, 2016). These issues were raised by most of the respondents who highlighted the existence of gaps in the training and experience of the experts from HERQA. For example, a respondent commented:

I have been in the business of private higher education for 15 years and I have dealt with HERQA in many occasions, but I feel that the agency has more power and mandates on paper. But it performs poorly in practice. I doubt that its officers have the right knowledge, experience and most importantly professionalism that the job requires. (MBM1, 06.10.2018)

The respondents underscored the need for enhancing the knowledge and experience of the experts involved in designing the quality evaluation tools (such as standards for audits and accreditation) and carrying out evaluations. Moreover, there are hesitations regarding the sense of ownership with which the agency works on the assurance and enhancement of quality in higher education. The analysis shows that the respondents share the view that HERQA is performing its responsibilities to the

¹²⁷ According to the records of HERQA, the number of accredited private higher education institutions operating in the capacity of a university, university college and college in the 2019/20 academic year has grown to 245 (HERQA, 2020a; Tadele, 2020; Tesfa, 2020).

¹²⁸ The focus group discussion with the respondents from HERQA, held in 2018, indicated that the agency has a total of about 20 experts (nine accreditation experts and 11 audit experts), which falls considerably shorter than the expected 37 experts (22 experts for accreditation and 15 experts for audit).

extent that its current capacity allows but not yet at the level that is required. As previous studies showed, the capacity limitations of HERQA have compromised its 'credibility, legitimacy and acceptance' in the face of higher education institutions and other stakeholders involved in the quality assurance process (Kahsay, 2012, p. 244; Salmi et al., 2017; Yirdaw, 2016).

8.5.4 Allegations of corruption

Certain interviews and few off-the-record discussions conducted at the request of some respondents point to allegations of corruption against HERQA's experts¹²⁹. The allegations were more directly voiced by respondents from the public and private higher education institutions and the non-governmental stakeholders who are actively involved in quality assurance processes in Ethiopia. Interestingly, the interviews with the respondents from the Ministry of Education and the focus group discussions with accreditation and audit experts at HERQA also briefly and, at times, indirectly mentioned such rumours.

Certain private higher education institutions allegedly bribed some experts and officials from HERQA in order to bypass certain formal requirements and for favourable accreditation and reaccreditation evaluation outcomes that pose risks to the status of their programme accreditations and operating license¹³⁰. The interviews with selected researchers further allege the existence of 'networks of corruption' where certain unprofessional experts from HERQA receive bribes from private institutions in exchange for a 'favourable decision' in accreditation evaluations and for 'leaking information' about imminent surprise visits (RWT1, 10.10.2018). This type of information leaking to private higher education institutions related to the upcoming sudden visits by certain experts from HERQA is argued to have significantly inhibited the effectiveness of such sudden visits, since it was only

¹²⁹ In addition to this, the researcher raised questions regarding the accusations of corruption to some of the respondents with whom he had built a modest rapport that was considered sufficient for discussing such sensitive issues in an informal setting. These discussions took place after the interviews and focus group discussion sessions had been concluded.

¹³⁰ During an informal discussion, a senior accreditation expert from HERQA disclosed that he was offered a large sum of money by a private higher education institution for giving a positive decision on its application for accreditation of its new programme. The expert reported that he rejected the offer and advised the owner that he could invest a smaller amount and fulfil the minimum quality requirements to secure the accreditation permit lawfully. Regardless of the truth behind these statements, such disclosures provide additional information in support of the prevalent rumours related to corruption.

possible to surprise a few institutions without the information quickly spreading to other institutions. It allows institutions to prepare for a deceptive and orchestrated presentation, for example, by moving resources and facilities from elsewhere to those campuses that are going to be the subject of the imminent surprise evaluation. Moreover, certain experts from HERQA have been accused of practicing favouritism towards some private institutions and discriminating against others. It was claimed that experts of the agency turn a blind eye, supposedly due to alleged ‘dubious ties and hidden arrangements’, when some institutions open programmes and campuses without the proper accreditation permits but take strict measures against a majority of private institutions that are caught violating such regulations (NGSA2, 09.10.2018). Similarly, the respondents in the focus group discussions with the accreditation experts from HERQA reiterated the allegations of unprofessional conduct, which implied that some of their colleagues may have colluded with private institutions that were undergoing external quality evaluations. On the other hand, the data revealed claims that some experts from HERQA tend to view their official mandate for supervising and regulating higher education institutions as a ‘source of business’ by ‘exploiting minor mistakes’ and using them as an ‘excuse’ to pressure private institutions whose operational survival depends on accreditation and reaccreditation permits into paying bribes (MBM1, 06.10.2018).

The interview with the member of the legal services unit of HERQA further affirms the widespread accusations of corruption, particularly in the form of bribes and paying for accommodation, food and drinks for teams of evaluators during site visits. The data from this interview points to the lack of an attractive salary and per diem from HERQA as the main factor that makes some experts from HERQA and external reviewers who are a part of the team of evaluators vulnerable to the enticements of corruption¹³¹. The following excerpt from the interview explains these issues in greater detail:

We hear rumours that HERQA’s experts are corrupted, but I would not be surprised if they indeed are. They are also human beings. What do you expect when the government gives substantial responsibility for granting accreditation and shutting down programmes at private institutions and make decisions that affect generations, but pays relatively the lowest salary to staff at HERQA as civil servants? There must be an attractive salary scale to entice highly competent experts. Its salary scale is one of the least attractive. The lowest salary paid at any government organisation in Ethiopia is here at HERQA. We have frequently requested the Ministry for this to be resolved but the government has not accorded sufficient attention to the agency. Because of this, private institutions have tried to corrupt HERQA’s experts. We

¹³¹ External reviewers exercise more power in accreditation panels than HERQA’s experts.

cannot confirm who received bribes and how much they received because corruption by itself is secretive, hidden and complex. But corruption is visible in practice when coming across institutions of absolutely poor quality which however have obtained accreditation permits. The per diem paid to HERQA's experts is too small. The highest per diem paid to our experts is 225 ETB per day¹³². How can you expect this small amount of money to cover breakfast, lunch, dinner and accommodation? It's impossible! It alone does not even cover accommodation cost. Private institutions know about this problem and the challenges of our experts when they go on a site visit outside the capital city, and hence arrange luxury accommodation for our experts and cover their expenses for food and drinks. That's the first corruption. This is what's practically happening. (HLAS, 15.02.2019)

In addition to the small remuneration package provided by HERQA, the profit orientation and the necessity of securing accreditation and reaccreditation permits for the financial success and survival of private higher education institutions could, as argued by respondents, push the experts and reviewers into becoming corrupt and having other illicit arrangements. Furthermore, these challenges were also seen by some of the respondents as a 'part of the broader corruption problem' faced by Ethiopia today (MBM1, 06.10.2018). Regardless of root cause, the analysis of interview data further highlighted that corruption compromises the objectivity of evaluations and decision-making of experts during accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations:

How can an expert reject an institution's application for accreditation or reaccreditation permit while that institution has provided the expert with accommodation and treated with good hospitality? How could experts say that the institution is wrong for doing so? Private institutions know our weak and vulnerable points. The government should know this and take corrective measures. This takes away the freedom of our experts and prevents them from making objective evaluations. Our experts are not financially self-sufficient to be independent in their decision making. (HLAS, 15.02.2019)

It is clear from the research data that there are only a few allegations of corruption and unprofessional conduct against experts from HERQA in their external quality audit evaluations and overall supervision and monitoring of public higher education institutions. This could be due to the fact that public institutions, unlike their private counterparts, are exempted from accreditation and reaccreditation requirements and can open new programmes and continue to deliver courses without having to secure accreditation and reaccreditation permits or external approval from HERQA.

¹³² This is equal to approximately 8 USD at the time of data collection.

The researcher recorded these accusations of corruption but neither sought supporting evidence nor verified the veracity of such claims, as this was deemed to be beyond the scope of the study and as corruption, by its nature, is hidden and not easily accessible to scientific research. It was important to refrain from transcending the boundaries of scientific inquiry and stepping into the realms of investigative journalism and criminal investigation. However, these allegations indicate the existence of widespread suspicion and weak trust on the part of higher education institutions towards HERQA and its experts. This emphasises the need to fight against a culture of corruption and compromising quality and ethical standards. The interviews with the non-governmental stakeholders claim that the Ministry of Education has inspected some of the allegations of corruption, which resulted in certain experts getting fired and being subjected to other administrative measures. The researcher however could not confirm these claims from credible documented materials.

As such, a credible confirmation of the presence of corruption came from a recent media report where HERQA admitted that some of its own employees have been abetting the violation of regulations, problematic operations and the misconduct encountered at some private higher education institutions (Wolde, 2020). The report stated that some of its employees have established networks of corruption, exchange of favours and profit-sharing arrangements with some of the investors and owners of private higher education institutions despite the operational codes prohibiting such illicit arrangements. The public relations officer of HERQA announced that the agency has fired and sued two employees involved in such activities. The agency also expressed its plan to continue investigating such breaches of code of professional engagement and take the necessary administrative and disciplinary measures against perpetrators. HERQA further underlined that such illicit practices and networks of corruption have significantly weakened its daily operations, created obstacles for monitoring and regulating private education institutions and harmed the quality standards of Ethiopian higher education (Wolde, 2020). Furthermore, the engagement in such illicit networks of corruption is found to directly contradict HERQA's stated values regarding professionalism and professional integrity, which require its staff to operate ethically through exemplary and fair behaviour when undertaking official duties and responsibilities (HERQA, 2006a).

On balance, it must be noted that some respondents approached the subject of corruption with caution and acknowledged that a majority of the experts of HERQA engage with higher education institutions in a professional manner. These

respondents argued that the positive contribution of HERQA must not be understated and overshadowed by such accusations. They credit HERQA for playing a crucial role in the gradual development of quality and quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education in both public and private higher education institutions.

8.6 Discussion of key findings

This chapter presented the data analysis for the first research question. Accordingly, it explored the extent to which the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia trusts higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance of higher education. This inquiry was conducted through the four conceptual dimensions of trust discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework, namely concern, capacity, openness and risk. An overall level of trust between HERQA and higher education institutions has been assessed as a collective product of these dimensions. The section below presents a brief summary and discussion of the key findings from the data analysis for the first research question.

8.6.1 Contrasting perceptions

The study shows HERQA's dichotomous perception and assessment of institutional concern and commitment for quality assurance, capacity for safeguarding quality and properly implementing quality assurance, openness and honest reporting of issues related to quality and quality assurance and risk of entrusting the task of safeguarding quality and assuring the quality of core activities to higher education institutions through less external quality regulation for public and private higher education institutions. This contrasting perception tends to positively portray public higher education institutions as trustworthy, whereas it views their private counterparts critically and with suspicion. The findings suggest that HERQA is however aware of the existence of exceptions to such generic and contrasting outlooks. The study provides evidence on the importance of organisational knowledge at HERQA and the history of the development of the relationship it has with higher education institutions in shaping the assessment of its accreditation and audit experts regarding the perceived overall trustworthiness of public and private institutions.

Public higher education institutions are considered by HERQA to have higher concern and capacity for quality and quality assurance, more open and honest

reporting of information related to quality standards and implementation of quality assurance, and less or moderate risk to quality if entrusted with responsibilities for safeguarding quality in the absence of quality audits and other external quality evaluations. In contrast, HERQA tends to regard most private higher education institutions as having low concern for assuring quality, lacking adequate institutional capacity for assuring the quality of services and properly conducting quality assurance, increasingly engaging in deception, dishonest reporting and the violation of regulations, and posing substantial risks to quality and quality assurance if they would no longer be required to undergo accreditation and audit evaluations by HERQA. The scale of the problems and deficiencies regarding concern, capacity, openness and risk to quality and quality assurance are considered by HERQA to be less for public higher education institutions and significantly higher for private institutions. These perspectives have created differential trust relations between HERQA and public higher education institutions, on one hand, and between HERQA and private higher education institutions on the other. These differences seem to inform the overall level of HERQA's propensity to trust public and private higher education institutions. Accordingly, the data analysis found more trust for the former and suspicion and weaker trust for the latter.

The study suggests the existence of a convergence between HERQA's strategic objectives and the formally and explicitly expressed concern for quality and quality assurance at public higher education institutions. The convergence seems to be relatively comparable across higher education institutions operating within the two sectors included in this study, but there are significant differences in terms of substantive concerns. In this regard, public higher education institutions are considered to be established by the government for the primary purpose of serving society and supporting national development. HERQA however identifies the profit motive of private higher education institutions as a major source of problems and pressures, which, in most cases, impedes institutional motivation to safeguard quality.

A shared understanding exists among the audit and accreditation experts of HERQA that most public higher education institutions have better institutional capacity and resources at their disposal for providing quality services and supporting internal quality assurance efforts, while, on the contrary, a majority of the private higher education institutions are generally considered to lack the adequate capacity and resources for quality assurance. The differences in institutional capacity for quality and quality assurance are broadly related to financial resources, internal structure and organisation for quality assurance, human resources at internal quality

assurance units, training and capacity-building of staff engaged in internal quality assurance activities and quality assurance tools. These differences stem from the fact that the federal government provides the capital and recurrent budgets, human and material resources and facilities to public higher education institutions, whereas private higher education institutions rely on the revenue generated through tuition fees and the non-public funds and assets possessed by their owners and shareholders.

The findings from the data analysis indicate that quality assurance experts from HERQA strongly criticise the prevalence of deception, dishonest reporting, the violation of regulations and the lack of honest and critical self-reflection at most private higher education institutions. The accreditation experts of HERQA are largely aware of the common deception tactics employed by these institutions with regard to programme facilities, academic and administrative staff, programme curricula and course modules, students and other key requirements of the minimum quality standards. In contrast, HERQA tends to consider public higher education institutions to have less motivation to withhold information from HERQA about their perceived weaknesses regarding quality and quality assurance. In some cases, the public institutions overstate their strengths in the self-evaluation documents and provide programmes for tuition fees through non-regular modalities without the approval of HERQA.

In the absence of an external quality regulation by HERQA, the respondents in this study expressed their concerns that most higher education institutions in Ethiopia would lack the intrinsic commitment and motivation to proactively address quality concerns and strive to ensure the quality standards of the education, research and community service they provide to their stakeholders. The analysis of the data suggests that a majority of the respondents anticipate that the risks to quality and quality assurance, in the absence of external quality regulations enforced by HERQA, would likely be moderate at public higher education institutions but higher at private institutions in the same scenario. This implies that public higher education institutions are more dependable than their private counterparts with regard to issues related to quality and quality assurance in higher education. This further suggests that if HERQA would entrust higher education institutions with the responsibility of safeguarding quality standards with no subsequent external quality evaluation, the risks to quality, which would otherwise be addressed through accreditation, would likely be more pronounced than the aspects of operation that are assessed using institutional and programme audits. Additionally, certain risks were anticipated when

ensuring the consistency, coordination and structure of operations and the implementation of quality assurance across higher education institutions.

8.6.2 Significant inconsistencies between perception and evidence from cases

The analysis of the case higher education institutions showed marked inconsistencies between the actual situation of the studied institutions and HERQA's assessment of the perceived concerns, capacity, openness and risk at public and private higher education institutions. This seems to have implications for the level of trust HERQA accords to higher education institutions.

Despite the perceived convergence in the concern for quality and quality assurance by HERQA for public higher education institutions, the findings from the analysis of data for the case institutions indicate a lack of consistent commitment to quality at various levels and of intrinsic attention to the implementation of quality assurance, as well as generally weak tangible concerns for quality at the grassroots level. This is despite the commitment to quality expressed in the institutional vision and mission statements and strategic documents. In terms of formally expressed goals, the findings of the study indicate a significant convergence of intentions associated with the purpose, significance and expected outcomes of implementing quality management. There seems to be a shared understanding regarding the importance of meeting the agreed standards and rescuing the deteriorating quality of education, but the study shows that these intentions are not always translated into tangible actions. The empirical evidence uncovered the inadequate concern and commitment that efforts for assuring and enhancing quality practically receive at public higher education institutions as opposed to the seemingly overly positive and misleading preconception held by HERQA. This misconception may stem from the confidence and leniency associated with public higher education institutions as public organisations that are mainly driven by a responsibility to provide social services without profit motives and contribute to national development and are subjected to various accountability instruments designed to ensure adherence to the fundamental missions they are tasked with pursuing.

Similarly, public higher education institutions have limitations in terms of allocating and utilising their relatively better overall institutional capacity for institutional efforts aimed at assuring and enhancing quality. In contrast to the prevalent perception of HERQA, the overall institutional capacity and resources

available to public higher education institutions may not be necessarily committed and allocated to internal quality assurance units and their activities. This suggests that the level of institutional capacity and the actual amount of resources and support at the disposal of departments for ensuring the quality standards of programmes and the staff working on quality assurance may not be comparable.

Interestingly, the findings of the study suggest that the institutional commitment to quality management and proper use of existing resources, however scarce they may be, can be more important, at times, than the actual level of the overall institutional capacity for determining the status of quality management. This was particularly the case in the considerably positive performance at Admas University as an institution from the private sector. In contrast, the selected public higher education institutions, namely Mekelle University, Wollo University and Woldia University, despite having relatively better financial, material and material resources at their disposal than private higher education institutions, tend to pay limited attention to internal quality management. This was found across first, second and third-generation public higher education institutions and has resulted in the allocation of inadequate resources for internal quality assurance efforts. The study found differences across higher education institutions, from both public and private sectors, in the level of the overall institutional capacity and degree of commitment towards allocating the available resources for quality assurance activities. These findings further challenge the assumptions and preconceptions that consider the level of institutional capacity at higher education institutions as a likely predictor of their actual performance in terms of internal quality management. The evidence from this study however does not refute the existing theoretical and empirical knowledge that assuring and enhancing quality requires resources and that institutional capacity is crucial for the development of such internal quality management practices.

Furthermore, the study found that all the selected case institutions have set up some form of internal organisational structures and units designated to coordinate quality management activities. The empirical findings however reveal three major challenges for such structures. First, these structures have not cascaded to the department level and academic units to effectively facilitate the quality management efforts at the grassroots level. Second, the internal quality management structures are not adequately staffed with academics who have training and experience in quality management. Third, and more importantly, these internal structures for quality management are not functioning actively, except in the case of Admas University. These empirical findings illustrate the slow progress of the development of internal quality assurance a decade following the introduction of the requirements for internal

quality enhancement at higher education institutions through the proclamation (650/2009). For example, a study conducted by Teshome and Kebede (2009), the director and a senior expert at HERQA, concluded that despite higher education institutions seeming to embrace the idea of assuring and enhancing quality, only a few institutions have put in place the necessary institutional policy framework: most institutions lack systematic internal quality assurance mechanisms that are capable of informing institutional decision-making. The study also stated that the existing internal units established for quality assurance at a few institutions were in their infancy and lacked visible functionality. These conclusions, to a significant degree, resonate with the findings of the present study. Thus, stimulating the development of internal quality assurance systems requires greater commitment and support from higher education institutions, HERQA and other stakeholders.

Regarding openness, the study suggests that public higher education institutions overstate their strengths and hide their perceived weaknesses in their self-evaluation documents and in other types of reporting related to quality assurance for HERQA, although to a substantially lesser degree when compared to their private counterparts. This deviates from HERQA's tendency to consider public institutions as being more open and honest in their reporting and being less motivated to engage in deception. Higher education institutions generally have a weak culture with regard to undertaking genuine critical self-assessments. What is more interesting is HERQA's unbending and overly positive stance on public higher education institutions while simultaneously being largely aware of their gradually increasing violations of regulations through their expansion of additional income-generating activities by providing fee-based programmes using non-regular modalities and running programmes in partnership with private institutions that have not obtained the proper accreditation permits to do so and in the absence of a national-level framework that regulates public-private partnerships in higher education. Besides openness issues, HERQA falls short in effectively monitoring and following up with higher education institutions and their extent of compliance with quality management procedures and regulations. The communication of HERQA with private higher education institutions is more frequent, whereas that with public institutions is occasional and, since 2017, almost non-existent.

The study also uncovered more risks to quality and quality assurance than the moderate uncertainties that HERQA associates with the likelihood of responsible operation and self-restraint at public higher education institutions in scenarios where quality audits and other external quality regulations would be discontinued. The findings of the study suggest that public higher education institutions have significant

limitations with regard to the concerns and commitment for safeguarding quality, allocating necessary resources for quality assurance efforts and openly reporting information related to quality and quality assurance.

8.6.3 Trust as an aggregate of concern, capacity, openness and risk

In this study, the aggregation of concern, capacity, openness and risk constitute a collective assessment of the extent to which a quality assurance agency trusts higher education institutions regarding quality and quality assurance. The combination of these four interrelated dimensions constitutes an overall assessment of trust. These dimensions provided a useful means of assessing trust in the relationship between HERQA and public and private higher education institutions in Ethiopia. This illustrates that trust is mainly conceptualised and assessed as a multidimensional construct in this study (Butler, 1991; Costa, 2003; Hardin, 2002; Kujala et al., 2016; Li et al., 2012).

As discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework, a high level of overall trust is achieved when all four dimensions are ranked positively (Mishra, 1996; Pope, 2004). It is theorised that no fewer than four positively ranked dimensions would be sufficient for a trusting relationship to emerge. There would be low overall trust if three of the dimensions are perceived positively but the remaining dimension ranks low. A negative perception of a single trust dimension is likely to negatively affect the levels of the related constructs, which subsequently renders trust intentions fragile (Bergan, 2012; Kramer, 1999; Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017; McKnight et al., 1998). Therefore, it would be necessary for all dimensions to be perceived consistently and positively for trust to be established between actors. These theorisations seem to imply that a positive overall level of trust is only possible when all individual dimensions are perceived positively. Hence, this suggests that a positive overall trust between HERQA and higher education institutions with respect to the quality and quality assurance in higher education can arise when HERQA perceives that a higher education institution has: high concerns for safeguarding quality and quality assurance, high institutional capacity and allocates adequate resources to uphold quality and implement internal mechanisms of quality assurance and enhancement, high openness and honesty in reporting information related to quality and quality assurance and practice of critical self-evaluation, and poses low or moderate risk for the wellbeing of quality and quality assurance where it would be subjected to less external regulation by HERQA.

As the discussion presented in the previous subsections indicates, HERQA tends to positively assess the concern, capacity, openness and risk associated with quality and quality assurance at public higher education institutions. A positive assessment across these dimensions suggests its relatively strong overall trust in public institutions. HERQA considers public higher education institutions as having relatively better concern for quality, capacity for ensuring quality standards and implementing the procedures and processes of assuring and enhancing quality, high openness in communication and less motivation for dishonest reporting, and poses low or, at most, moderate risk to quality and quality assurance in circumstances where they would operate without quality audit and other external quality regulations by HERQA.

The discontinuation of institutional- and programme-level quality audits since 2017, which were the only type of external quality evaluation that public higher education institutions were subjected to, shows that the current realities of the relationship between HERQA and public institutions in Ethiopia is consistent with a practical demonstration of the theoretical scenario of a quality assurance agency entrusting expectations for the self-regulation of standards and upholding quality with higher education institutions accompanied with little direct external regulation and evaluation of the fulfilment of these expectations. This suggests that HERQA tends to perceive little or moderate risk to be associated with abandoning external quality evaluations for public institutions. It also reflects HERQA's willingness to assume this risk instead of maintaining direct external regulation. This indicates HERQA's, and the Ministry of Education's, overall strong trust in public institutions. The literature indicates that positive stereotyping may serve to create positive trusting beliefs between actors (McKnight et al., 1998). However, the specific context of the relationship stands in stark contrast to how private higher education institutions are viewed and treated.

In addition to HERQA's strong trust in public institutions and weak trust in their private counterparts, the evidence from this study reveals that both public and private higher education institutions tend to have low trust in HERQA due to its dichotomous quality regulations for public and private institutions, questionable autonomy and perceived conflict of interests, capacity limitations and the widespread allegations of corruption and unprofessional conduct against some of its accreditation experts.

8.6.4 Misplaced trust in public higher education institutions

The significant inconsistencies between HERQA's overly positive perception of concern, capacity, openness and risk of public higher education institutions and the empirical evidence that shows the limitations of the public institutions included in this study suggest that the trust HERQA has in public higher education institutions could be misplaced. HERQA seems to have misplaced its trust in public higher education institutions as a result of its overly positive outlook that, to a limited extent, may be regarded as a blind faith. This shows that the trust HERQA places in public institutions could be misplaced, as it does not seem to be established on entirely accurate and credible foundations.

The literature indicates that trust can be misplaced (Bachmann, 2001; Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Kramer, 1999). Such seemingly misplaced trust could be abused, violated or damaged by public higher education institutions. Such problems are identified in the literature as being some of the limitations of trust (Kujala et al., 2016; Kutsyruba & Walker, 2017; Mishra, 1996; Spier, 2013; Zucker, 1986).

Such misplaced trust can pose severe threats to the quality of higher education and render external quality requirements ineffective. The literature also indicates that the costs and consequences of misplaced trust can be dangerous, harmful and severe (Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Kramer, 1999). When trust is misplaced, including as a result of an overly optimistic assumption by a trustor about the trustworthiness of a given trustee, it can produce a risk that may result in substantial losses (Bachmann, 2001; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). This can lead a quality assurance agency to trust a potentially undeserving higher education institution. This suggests that misplacing trust in public higher education institutions could pose a threat to the wellbeing of quality in higher education and the interests of stakeholders. Moreover, placing undisputed trust in the face of significant institutional limitations and shortcomings raises concerns regarding the accountability, appropriateness and feasibility of such an approach amidst the growing dissatisfaction of stakeholders with the falling quality standards in a rapidly expanding higher education system.

HERQA's misplaced trust in public higher education institutions can be explained in terms of structural, communication and attitudinal issues. Structurally, HERQA, as a statutory quality assurance agency with less managerial, financial and operational autonomy, seems to mimic the favourable outlook and treatment of public higher education institutions by the Ministry of Education and other governmental stakeholders. The literature indicates that the level of managerial and operational autonomy such agencies have is, in part, determined by government

priorities, funding, political agendas and the nature of the accountability to internal and external stakeholders (Harvey, 2002, pp. 249-250). As discussed in Chapter Four, quality assurance bodies can serve as intermediary agencies of the state, particularly in the case of statutory agencies (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey, 2002), that monitor the quality and standards of higher education institutions on behalf of the state. The responsibility of the state to regulate the standards of higher education institutions is, in practice, transferred to the quality assurance agencies as a part of the broader transformation of the relationship between governments and higher education institutions. This transformation brought deregulation and more autonomy to higher education institutions and a subsequent growing demand for being accountable to governments.

The understanding that quality assurance agencies are intermediaries between governments and higher education institutions enables the perception of the relationship between higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies as being a part of the broader government-university relationship. These roles of quality assurance agencies can be interpreted as that of being a third-party conduit of trust and accountability between the national and institutional levels (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). As the empirical evidence of misplaced trust suggests, the information that a third party, such as HERQA, relays may however lack completeness, accuracy and, in some cases, objectivity (Kramer, 1999). The use of third parties and agents may disguise asymmetric power relations, since they rarely exercise equal levels of control over both the parties that are engaged in the relationship (Hardy et al., 1998; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). As such, HERQA tends to prioritise the interests and needs of the Ministry of Education and other governmental stakeholders over those of higher education institutions. In addition to the issue of autonomy, questions over possible conflicts of interest may arise in the operations of statutory quality assurance agencies such as HERQA. In such cases, the quality evaluations of public higher education institutions, which are funded by governments and centrally administered by ministries, conducted by a quality assurance agency such as HERQA, which also relies on government funding and is accountable to ministerial structures, could be seen as tantamount to the ministries evaluating themselves (Salmi et al., 2017). The objectivity of HERQA's assessment of the concern, capacity, openness and risk of public institutions is thus evidently questioned.

In terms of communication, some of the misconceptions HERQA has about public higher education institutions may be the result of the inadequate and infrequent interactions that it has with these institutions. These involve an

institutional quality audit every five years, which, to make matters worse, has been entirely discontinued since 2017. The differences in the interaction that HERQA has with public and private institutions, in terms of relative frequency, intensity and depth, seems to bear significant implications. This is argued to have limited the opportunities that are available to HERQA to develop familiarity with and a detailed understanding of the actual condition of quality and quality assurance at public institutions. The exemption of public institutions from the relatively frequent accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations means that HERQA lacks critical, accurate and up-to-date information on the minimum quality standards of the programme curricula and course modules, programme facilities, academic and administrative staff and periodic progress reports of public higher education institutions. Thus, HERQA lacks clear information that ensures whether each public institution and its programmes fulfil the defined quality standard requirements. As a result, the experts of the agency are likely to be less acquainted with the full extent of the quality problems at public institutions.

With regard to the aspect of attitude, the findings of this study indicate that a sense of in-group sentiments is shared by the respondents from HERQA with respect to public higher education institutions, as both are public organisations with similar funding and accountability structures. This tendency of perceiving themselves as belonging to the same category of public organisations that serve society may have facilitated a degree of leniency among the experts and leadership of HERQA when it comes to assessing the current status and possible risks to quality at public higher education institutions. Such thinking seems to externalise, alienate and critically perceive private higher education institutions. As shown in the theoretical and analytical framework, a positive assessment of trust and judgement with regard to the trustworthiness of actors can be predicated on a perception of the actors belonging to the same social and organisational category. This can lead to an actor developing a more optimistic cognitive orientation, expectations and favourable views with respect to the characteristics of the in-group actors, thus facilitating the formation of a positive 'presumptive trust' (Kramer, 1999, p. 577). The literature indicates that trust can more readily develop between actors who share similar social connections and backgrounds (Tyler, 2003). It is argued that a shared sense of belonging and identity can play a role in the formation of trust (De Boer, 2002; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Interestingly, the evidence obtained from the case institutions suggests that the respondents from the public higher education institutions tend to have weak trust in HERQA due to the double standard in its approaches to public and private institutions, compromised managerial and

operational autonomy, acute capacity limitations and the prevalent accusations of corruption against its experts. This seems to challenge the theoretical views found in the literature (e.g. Hardin, 2002), since the empirical evidence from this study suggests that the trust and optimistic expectations of a trustor may not always beget similar trust in the trustee. Accordingly, HERQA's relatively strong trust in public higher education institutions is not reciprocated. Instead, the respondents from all the three studied public institutions see HERQA as relying on inconsistent and preferential approaches, being largely incapable of effectively enforcing its mandates and safeguarding quality standards, and lacking credibility, autonomy and professionalism.

Another explanation for why HERQA seems to continue to trust public institutions despite the significant quality problems observed in these institutions and their emerging engagement in the violation of the regulations for quality could be because the agency relies on 'belief-confirming cognition mechanisms' in which actors may 'ignore counterbelief evidence' and rationalise, absorb or discount the 'negative actions of the other' (McKnight et al., 1998, p. 484). The preconceptions and prior beliefs HERQA holds regarding the trustworthiness of public institutions seem to determine the information and evidence that the agency is likely to pay attention to and consider relevant. Further, this could also be a function of the positive stereotyping of public institutions, while their private counterparts tend to be negatively stereotyped.

8.6.5 Justified suspicion and weak trust towards most private higher education institutions

In contrast to public institutions, a negative assessment of concern, capacity, openness and risk by HERQA reflects the agency's relatively weak overall trust in the majority of the private higher education institutions. HERQA considers private institutions as being driven by profit-maximisation motives rather than concerns for quality, having weak institutional capacity for ensuring quality standards and implementing quality assurance and enhancement procedures, having low openness in communication and substantial motivation for dishonest reporting, and posing considerable risks to quality and quality assurance if they operate without audits, accreditations and other external quality regulations enforced by HERQA. The aggregate of these negative assessments across each of the four dimensions is argued to create widespread suspicion and inadequate trust towards private institutions.

HERQA's weak trust in private higher education institutions seems to be justified in various ways. Operating with a profit orientation is widely seen as a key source of concern to quality at private higher education institutions. There is a prevalent opinion among HERQA's experts, the respondents from the studied public and private institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers from the domain of quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education that the business interests and profit orientation of private higher education institutions severely weaken their concerns and intrinsic commitment with regard to quality. A majority of the private institutions have acute shortages of the financial, human and material resources necessary for providing quality education, research and community service. Most private institutions often have weak, inadequate and largely non-functional internal structures for quality assurance. Moreover, the study revealed an alarming prevalence of deception, orchestrated presentations, staged performances and intentional provision of fabricated information to HERQA by private higher education institutions that seek to hide their weaknesses and overstate their perceived strengths. The 16 narratives gathered from the research data show that this game of cat and mouse seems to have become the everyday reality of the interaction between HERQA and private institutions. Such discretion and intentional provision of misinformation are at odds with the essence of openness.

As such, HERQA may tend to pay attention to the deceptive behaviour and violations of regulations than evidence of the progress of institutions in terms of implementing internal quality assurance and monitoring the quality of their operations. This may perpetuate presumptive distrust towards private institutions. As discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework, trust can be fragile, as behaviour that destroys trust tends to be easily noticeable and to carry more weight and impact than behaviour that builds trust (Slovic, 1993). There is asymmetry in the weight and degree of the judgement that actors attach to trust and distrust, due to which distrust can be more easily visible and amplified than trust (Kramer, 1999). Actors may selectively pay more attention to negative pieces of information than positive ones. Therefore, trust-eroding experiences may draw more attention than those that build trust (Hardin, 2002), thereby perpetuating presumptive distrust in a given relationship (Kramer, 1999). Such theoretical explanations may justify the weak trust and prevalent suspicious outlook of HERQA on private higher education institutions. This may also explain how private institutions tend to reciprocate HERQA's scepticism on them. Accordingly, the study found the existence of widespread mutual suspicion, weak trust and, in some cases, active distrust between private higher education institutions and HERQA. The lack of robust concern for

quality in private higher education institutions and their widespread engagement in deception, to a certain degree, may have been exacerbated by this mutual distrust.

Additionally, the weak trust relationship between HERQA and private higher education institutions is further explained by the high risk associated with abandoning the external instruments of quality regulations. All stakeholders unequivocally agree that private higher education institutions cannot be trusted to properly monitor the quality of their core operations and operate responsibly without intentionally compromising quality standards. There is a shared understanding that the deterioration of quality of education would far worse than it currently is if private institutions were not subjected to rigorous accreditation evaluations, external regulation and governance instruments. This study found strong evidence to support the claim that most private institutions cannot be trusted to function responsibly if external regulation of quality did not exist.

The aforementioned issues evidently hinder HERQA's propensity to trust private institutions. As indicated in Chapter Five, trust is difficult to develop when the potential risk involved in a given interaction is intolerable for a trustor (Adobor, 2006; Bachmann, 2001; Kramer, 1999). In such cases of higher levels of risk and uncertainty, a trustor may tend to seek validating information and pay more attention to the behaviour of the trustee, which may subsequently affect its propensity to trust (McKnight et al., 1998). Unlike the complacency towards public institutions, the application of stringent accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations for private institutions can be understood as the reflection of how HERQA, and the Ministry of Education, alienates and cautiously transacts with these institutions.

However, HERQA recognises the existence of exceptions. Admas University, for example, provides an extreme or deviant case among the widespread negative perceptions regarding the status of quality and quality assurance at private higher education institutions. The empirical evidence from Admas University suggests a rare situation wherein a private institution functions with strong commitment for quality, supports its quality assurance unit and activities with relatively better resources, takes quality assurance seriously, practices standardised documentation and more open and consistent reporting of information to HERQA and poses less risk to quality in the absence of accreditation and audit evaluations. The university has an internal motivation and drive for improving quality and using quality assurance as an instrument to develop and improve its institution to fulfil its vision and mission. The internal quality assurance system at Admas University was found to be adequately functional, and the associated operations have been institutionalised far better than those in the other studied public and private higher education

institutions. In stark contrast, the case of Medco Bio-Medical College seems to represent the negative end of the continuum, as HERQA views and treats the college with a relatively severe suspicion and minimal amount of trust. As the empirical findings of this study suggest, such cases of having a negative outlook and weak trust characterise the relationship between HERQA and a majority of the private higher education institutions operating in Ethiopia. This shows that a reputation of integrity, commitment and reliability may enhance trust, while a reputation for breaking promises, incompetence, dishonesty and opportunistic behaviour may foster suspicion and distrust (McKnight et al., 1998).

The empirical evidence from this study is consistent with some previous studies that conveyed a climate of suspicion, distrust and tension as the key feature of the landscape of the relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions in Ethiopia (Abebe, 2014, 2015b; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kahsay, 2012). The findings however dispute the claims put forth by Girma (2014, pp. 132-157) that ‘a climate of trust and mutual respect has started to develop’ between HERQA and higher education institutions¹³³. Furthermore, in a recent discussion on the quality of higher education held between HERQA and stakeholders, the Director General of HERQA stated, ‘Internally, there is fear and distrust within the agency, and when this is projected to institutions, it instils more fear. Private institutions, as a result, have been afraid of being approached by us [experts of the agency]’ (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018). The forum highlighted the need for reforming the organisational behaviour and working culture of the agency.

¹³³ Such findings suggesting the emergence of mutual trust and respect between higher education institutions and HERQA may have been shaped by the fact that the empirical investigation of the study in question was based on six higher education institutions, out of which three were first-generation public universities with relatively more experience and resources than their second- and third-generation counterparts, while two private institutions, namely Unity University and St. Mary’s University College, are among the small minority of private institutions that have a positive reputation for quality and responsible operation. This implies that the sample of the higher education institutions used in the study conducted by Girma (2014) may have deprived the study of key insights into the lack of commitment to quality, acute capacity limitations for providing quality services and the widespread practices of deception, dishonest reporting and the violation of regulations at most private institutions, which aggravate HERQA’s suspicion and distrust.

9 IMPLICATIONS OF TRUST BETWEEN A QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS FOR THE NATURE OF THE QUALITY MANAGEMENT MODEL

This chapter presents the empirical investigation of the second research question of this study: *What implications does the extent to which the quality assurance agency of Ethiopia trusts higher education institutions have for the nature of the quality management model implemented in Ethiopian higher education?* The inquiry builds on the discussion of trust between HERQA and higher education institutions. This chapter extends the empirical analysis of the weak and strong trust relations to the corresponding approaches that HERQA uses during its interaction with higher education institutions and the implications of these relations for the nature of the quality management model in use. As discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework, this aspect is analysed through the combined theoretical lenses of the selected insights from Gamson's theory of power and trust, perspectives on trust building and types of quality management models. These theoretical and analytical models guide the analysis of the data gathered from the focus group discussions, interviews and relevant documents obtained from HERQA and the case higher education institutions.

The data analysis uses insights from the case higher education institutions to support the empirical discussion. However, the empirical analysis of the second research question is less explicitly based on the individual case higher education institutions than the investigation of the first research question. This is justified by two reasons. First, HERQA enforces dichotomous external quality assurance requirements on public and private higher education institutions. Second, HERQA sets similar requirements and approaches for internal quality assurance at both public and private higher education institutions, as promulgated by the higher education proclamation (650/2009) (FDRE, 2009, Art. 22). These explanations suggest that the legal status of institutions (whether it is a public or private entity) seems to be, in many cases, more relevant in the eyes of HERQA than the individual identity of the higher education institution for shaping its engagements with and approaches to the quality management of higher education institutions. The analysis relies more on

relating the approaches employed by HERQA and their implications for quality management models to the public and private categories to which the case higher education institutions included in this study belong to. Where relevant, insights obtained from Admas University, which tend to deviate from such general trends, are highlighted to enrich the discussion.

9.1 Overall level of trust and corresponding approaches to achieve trust

In this section, the study ties the discussion of the overall level of trust that HERQA has in public and private higher education institutions with the corresponding approaches that it employs to safeguard quality and quality assurance and increase the trustworthiness of quality in Ethiopian higher education. As highlighted in the theoretical analytical framework, the presence of strong trust relations tends to reduce the need for regulation and monitoring, while weak trust begets closer control and inspection. These notions provide the link between the extent of trust between HERQA and higher education institutions and how this may have implications for the quality management models. Accordingly, the framework analyses the relatively weak trust that HERQA has in most private higher education institutions through the perspectives of Gamson's theory's category of low trust relations between actors and the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective on trust building. This discussion places emphasis on the instruments of control, regulation and incentives that are applied by HERQA. In contrast, HERQA's relatively strong, albeit misplaced, trust in most public higher education institutions is examined with the support of Gamson's theory's category of high trust relations and the normative-cognitive perspective on trust building. This discussion focuses on the values and norms supposedly shared between HERQA and higher education institutions which may have enabled the agency to rely less on the use of constraints and control instruments with regard to its engagements with public higher education institutions.

9.1.1 Weak trust and demand for control

Reliance on legislations, regulative and constraining instruments

As per the analysis of the data gathered from the focus group discussions, interviews and documents, HERQA mainly relies on legislations, regulations and directives as instruments for enforcing the compliance of higher education institutions to defined quality standards. As highlighted in Chapter Six, at the national level, the legislative framework that has guided HERQA's efforts for regulating quality and quality assurance at higher education institutions mainly includes higher education proclamations (351/2003) and (650/2009)¹³⁴. These proclamations have played a key role in introducing external and internal quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education. The higher education proclamation (351/2003) established HERQA with the responsibility of supervising relevance and quality in quality assurance and conducting audits and accreditation evaluations, whereas the proclamation 650/2009 introduced the requirements of internal quality enhancement in higher education institutions.

The mandates that the higher education proclamation (650/2009) grants to HERQA tend to focus on developing and enforcing the relevant criteria, setting quality requirements and assessment standards, issuing directives and guidelines regarding the operations of higher education institutions, and conducting periodic evaluations to ensure that the defined quality standards are being met and adhered to in higher education institutions and their programmes (also specified in HERQA, 2006a). According to Article 89, HERQA has to develop the quality criteria for audits and accreditation evaluations, set and enforce the requirements and directives for determining the status of institutions, evaluate requests for opening programmes or transforming institutions and make decision accordingly, evaluate the relevance and quality of the education and training provided by higher education institutions, ensure that the training offered is in line with socio-economic and other relevant national policies, and evaluate whether the relevance and quality enhancement systems of institutions are capable of ensuring quality in higher education (FDRE, 2009). These provisions suggest that HERQA's activities are primarily rooted in evaluating higher education institutions to ensure their compliance with the relevance and quality standards of education set forth by the proclamations and the other regulations and directives issued by the Ministry of Education and HERQA.

¹³⁴ This has been replaced with a revised proclamation (No. 1152/2019).

As the main legislative instrument, the proclamations make provisions that regulate the overall academic, administrative and operational aspects of higher education institutions. In addition, policy, strategic and technical guidelines, such as the series of Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP), the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) I and II and the recent Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) shape the approaches that are implemented by HERQA and higher education institutions to assure and enhance quality and ensure the continued relevance of higher education in accordance with the national policy agendas.

The approach employed by HERQA and the Ministry of Education seems to be predominantly founded on enforcing higher education institutions' compliance with the defined regulations. For instance, Article 72 of the proclamation provides a notable example of the explicitly articulated intentions of the government to subject private higher education institutions to a list of specific requirements. Accordingly, it is stated that every private institution is required to ensure strict compliance with the directives issued by the Ministry regarding academic regulations, ensure the minimum academic quality standards in several aspects of their teaching and learning processes, perform annual self-evaluations of their academic and research performance and communicate the results of these evaluations to HERQA, the Ministry of Education and the public (FDRE, 2009, Art. 72 [1/a-c]). Another regulation that private higher education institutions are subjected to is the responsibility of ensuring that their leadership and management structures, modes of operation, location and premises, facilities and campus environment are suitable with respect to the purposes of their respective institutional status, size of students and staff members and the nature of the programme and degree levels that they offer (FDRE, 2009, Art. 72 [1/e]). It is also mandatory to supply accurate information to HERQA, the Ministry of Education, the students and the public about the accredited programmes that are offered, form of delivery, duration of programmes, enrolment capacity, profiles of the academic staff and their modalities of employment. The proclamation requires higher education institutions to submit detailed annual reports to HERQA about their activities in relation to education and research. These requirements indicate that private higher education institutions are required to conduct their operations in accordance with the regulations and directives issued by the Ministry of Education and HERQA. This illustrates an emphasis on the compliance with the regulations, directives and legislative frameworks issued by the Ministry of Education or other relevant branches of government and HERQA.

Moreover, public and private higher education institutions are required to conduct institutional and programme audits based on the 10 specific focus areas and guidelines developed by HERQA. It is mandatory that the self-evaluation of higher education institutions addresses aspects such as governance and management system; vision, mission and educational goals; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; student admission and support services; programme relevance and curriculum; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and graduate outcomes; research and community outreach activities; and, finally, internal quality assurance (HERQA, 2006b; 2007). HERQA further provides detailed reference points, threshold description and indicative sources of information for each audit focus area. Both the self-assessment of higher education institutions and the external evaluation carried out by a panel of peer reviewers, organised by HERQA, are undertaken in accordance with these specifications.

Additionally, HERQA utilises various specific supplementary regulations and directives that are approved by the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Education and/or board of HERQA to facilitate the implementation of provisions of the proclamation¹³⁵. HERQA also enforces several directives issued by the Ministry of Education that provide working guidelines for regulating specific issues related to the operations of higher education institutions. Some of the additional directives utilised by HERQA include those that govern undergraduate and distance programmes, determine the status of private institutions (e.g. university, university college, college), and determine the equivalence of the degree certificates issued by institutions abroad.

The focus group discussions with the audit and accreditation experts from HERQA indicated that some of the regulations and directives are partially outdated, as it has been between five and nine years or more since most of these documents were published. The respondents argued that the existing legislative and regulative frameworks are in need of proper revision and amendment in a manner that adequately accommodates the current developments and transformation, scale of expansion and concerns with regard to Ethiopian higher education. It was reported that HERQA lacks specific regulations and frameworks for governing the new transformations occurring in higher education, such as issues related to the growing internationalisation trends, quality assurance in cross-border higher education

¹³⁵ It was reported that a number of specific guidelines pertaining to the requirements regarding the teaching staff and the number of students allowed in specific programmes are recently being sent to higher education institutions as regular letters signed by the Director of HERQA without the approval of the board or the Ministry of Education.

programmes, online and blended learning and other non-regular modes of delivery. It seems that higher education institutions have moved ahead of the agency, as some have already started providing online programmes without HERQA's approval due to delays in the development of necessary up-to-date regulations. The respondents criticised the lack of motivated and supportive leadership at HERQA and the Ministry of Education for the gaps in the regulative frameworks. This suggests the need for leadership with strong strategic foresight. In addition, although HERQA has the mandate to prepare additional necessary guidelines for quality assurance and propose amendments to the decrees and regulations approved by the Council of Ministers, and focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA and the interviews conducted with the selected researchers highlighted the significant limitations of the agency in terms of properly implementing and enforcing the existing mandates and regulative instruments. Another criticism shared by the respondents from HERQA suggests that the communication between the parliamentary standing committee on higher education and HERQA is limited to its leadership and excludes dialogues with the frontline audit and accreditation experts. This has prevented key issues, such as gaps in the existing legal frameworks, capacity limitation and questions regarding autonomy from being discussed and addressed directly.

As a response to the disruptions in the face-to-face teaching and learning processes and the closure of higher education institutions following the outbreak of COVID-19 and to cope with the developments in the electronic modes of delivery, HERQA prepared a draft directive in May 2020 that would activate, regulate and accredit undergraduate and postgraduate programmes delivered online by public and private higher education institutions (EPA, 2020a; HERQA, 2020f, 2020g, 2020h; Wondemagegn, 2020). The directive later received approval for use by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in July 2020.

Some respondents also highlighted the need for resolving certain controversial directives. For example, the directives that govern cross-border higher education and the requirements regarding the qualifications of the teaching staff at private institutions have become controversial in practice and have been criticised for being inconsistent with previous directives.

Generally, the above discussion suggests that the compliance with regulations and legislative frameworks provides the main mechanism through which the fulfilment of minimum quality standards and responsible operations of higher education institutions and the oversight of the sector is assured. It shows that both HERQA and the internal quality assurance units at the institutional level rely on the adherence

to directives and the regulative instruments to promote adherence to the desired quality status. They rely on these instead of the intrinsic commitment of higher education institutions and their academic units to dedicating efforts to safeguard the quality of education, research and community service they provide to the public. This is evident in the provisions made regarding HERQA's mandates in the existing legislative framework.

Legislation and regulative instruments used in the case higher education institutions

In addition to the national legislative and regulative frameworks, the data collected from the case higher education institutions shows that quality assurance at the institutional level is guided by the institutions' academic legislations, quality assurance policies and handbooks and various other useful tools and manuals. The case higher education institutions, except Medco Bio-Medical College, have developed some form of an institutional academic quality assurance policy and strategy. The data suggested that institutional quality assurance policies often lack clarity, consistency and proper implementation at the grassroots level. The quality assurance policy and guidelines drafted by the internal quality assurance units of Mekelle University and Woldia University were yet to be approved for implementation, at the time of data collection, by their respective university senates. Unlike the other studied higher education institutions, Medco Bio-Medical College has not developed an integrated and functional quality assurance policy despite having received the recommendation for doing so in the institutional audit that was carried out in 2014.

The studied higher education institutions also employ additional institution-level legislations, directives and quality assurance-related guidelines that are mainly contextualised from the guidelines for internal quality assurance issued by HERQA, the recommendations from Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and experiences adopted from other institutions. The institutions have a form of academic legislation that guides the daily academic operations, often referred to as senate legislation. There also are more specific guidelines that organise the development, implementation and evaluation of undergraduate, postgraduate, distance and continuing education programmes.

All the studied higher education institutions facilitate internal quality assurance activities with the support of various checklists. A notable example of this is the standardised documentation system used at Admas University, which facilitates the

communication and implementation of the national legal and regulative instruments and institutional guidelines. Admas University has standardised legislations, guidelines, forms and formats that are used for assessing quality across the various academic and administrative departments. These instruments were developed mainly based on the focus areas identified by HERQA for institutional quality audits, the lessons adopted from ISO practices and the recommendations of the Ethiopian Quality Awards organisation (EQA).

An important finding from the data analysis was that the staff working on internal quality assurance in the case higher education institutions tend to rely greatly on the guidelines for institutional quality audits issued by HERQA. Yet they seem to have a markedly limited familiarity and understanding of the provisions put forth by higher education proclamations, the national education and training policy and other major national level strategic documents, such as Education Strategy Development Programme (ESDP), that support quality improvements and the development of higher education. The respondents from, for instance, Wollo University suggested that national and institution-specific regulations are seldom consulted when a need arises to assess the potential legal measures that can be taken to resolve administrative and disciplinary problems. This suggests that the engagement in internal quality assurance activities seems to rarely be directly informed by the higher education proclamations.

In fact, as demonstrated by the data, the case higher education institutions more actively utilise the other frameworks that have been provided by external stakeholders. An example of such a national-level legal framework is the Harmonised Academic Policy of Ethiopian Public Higher Education Institutions, developed based on the senate legislations of several universities under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Education Strategy Centre (ESC) (Ministry of Education, 2013). Moreover, higher education institutions use the National Accreditation and Quality Improvement Standards for medicine and health science programmes. These standards were developed by HERQA in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other stakeholders such as Jhpiego, professional associations and public and private higher education institutions. Similarly, the Clinical Practice Guideline for Health Science Students, prepared by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with USAID and Jhpiego, provides national guidelines for the practical learning, duties and responsibilities of students and teachers and their relationship with patients while engaging in clinical practice.

Additionally, the graduates of undergraduate medicine and health science and law programmes take a compulsory national exit exam. It was reported that those who score over 60 per cent pass the exam and join the labour market, while those who fail are required to study the subjects in which they scored below the required threshold. Preparations are underway to extend the exit exams to all undergraduate programmes (Ministry of Education, 2017). These approaches are further integrated in the new proclamation (1152/2019), which promulgates that higher education institutions may administer exit exams for graduating students to ensure the quality of their learning (FDRE, 2019, Art. 21 [4]).

Lack of adequate incentive mechanisms

The analysis of the data revealed a lack of incentive mechanisms that promote improved commitment to quality and recognise and reward better engagement in quality assurance. The interviews with the respondents from the studied private institutions, particularly those from Admas University, and certain selected researchers criticised that HERQA has not formulated incentive instruments that reward and protect high-quality, well-performing and responsibly operating institutions. As a result, such institutions gain little advantage in return for demonstrating quality performance compared to others that lack a similar commitment. The Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association and some selected researchers argued that, due to the lack of instruments that provide incentives and protection, the few responsible, law-abiding and well-performing private higher education institutions are facing challenges from three directions: unethical private institutions who disregard regulations and amass students, the ripple effect of the measures taken against many irresponsible institutions and the dichotomous quality assurance requirements that grant public institutions an unfair advantage.

Incentives for appreciating and recognising high performance are also lacking in higher education institutions. For example, a qualitative study at a public higher education institution found a weak practice of incentivising and setting institutional mechanisms for motivating academic units and their staff to strive to achieve respectable quality standards (Abebe, 2014). The analysis of the data collected from the studied higher education institutions found a few prominent examples of the incentives that are being provided. As discussed in the previous chapter, Admas University has a well-established practice of critically evaluating and grading the performance reports of all its academic and administrative units every three months,

which seems to have been crucial in promoting better implementation of annual plans and improving the commitment to quality. In this system, each unit is graded on a scale of 'A' to 'F' or 'No Grade' (Tsegay, 2015, pp. 2-3). The units that have accomplished 95 per cent and above of their plans are graded 'A', those that have accomplished 90 per cent or above receive an 'A-', and 'F' is given to those that failed to accomplish 40 per cent of their plans. Another example of an incentive mechanism can be the practice of ranking colleges at Mekelle University according to their performance of implementing quality assurance. This is intended to stimulate competition and induce commitment to quality. The institutional transformation and quality assurance directorate of the university also, on occasions, has attempted to identify good practices by assessing the performance reports of colleges. For example, the respondents stated that the implementation of the Education Development Army (EDA) initiative at the College of Dryland Agriculture and Natural Resources was considered as a good practice. In this initiative, students were organised in groups, and each student specified the grades they aspired to achieve in each course. The students then jointly drew up plans on how to realise their goals, supported each other's learning and, later, evaluated their actual grades. The practice reportedly showed that students who participated in this initiative, which involved continuous follow ups and cooperative learning, have achieved higher success with scoring better grades. These isolated examples aside, the data analysis did not find systematic practices of employing incentives in the studied higher education institutions to galvanise quality improvement.

Additionally, a notable example of an incentive system employed at the national level has been the practice of ranking public universities based on performance, organised annually by the Consortium of Ethiopian Public University (CEPU). This was done for a few years and seems to currently be inactive. It is unclear as to what extent this ranking practice stimulated quality assurance mechanisms and drove improved institutional commitment to assuring the relevance and quality of academic services. The outcomes of the ranking were not directly linked to any types of rewards, monetary or otherwise.

The outcomes of internal and external quality evaluations, such as audits and accreditations, are not linked to funding, ranking or other systems of recognition and reward. Successful accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations result in higher education institutions securing the compulsory permission and approval from HERQA to open new programmes or continue to deliver existing ones. Institutions, however, do not gain any financial or other forms of support in return. In contrast to private institutions, the evidence obtained from the case higher education

institutions further underlines the dearth of incentives available to public universities for improving their performance with regard to quality assurance in the absence of accreditation requirements. The data showed little explicit initiations and efforts, except the limited efforts found at Woldia University, to learn from fellow better-performing higher education institutions. Interestingly, the respondents also argued that the absence of incentives could, in fact, put good-quality private higher education institutions at a disadvantage, since they compete for students and staff with other lower-quality institutions that increasingly exhaust the supply of potential students. This was argued to be the case due to HERQA's failure to strictly enforce regulations and safeguard the interests of law-abiding institutions. The quality audit experts from HERQA acknowledged these challenges during the focus group discussion.

The deficiencies of incentives designed to explicitly and implicitly motivate and reward good quality could be explained by the inadequate intrinsic commitment for quality at higher education institutions and their capacity limitations. The discussion presented in Chapter Eight showed that the studied higher education institutions demonstrated limited tangible concern for and support to quality assurance. Previous studies stated that the efforts aimed at safeguarding and enhancing the quality standards tend to fall short of the largely positive commitment articulated in national and institutional strategic documents (Abebe, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kabsay, 2012). The formally stated commitments are scarcely backed by tangible activities. These findings may imply weak shared values regarding quality between HERQA and higher education institutions. Moreover, the prevalent capacity limitations at higher education institutions and at HERQA and the Ministry of Education (as shown in Chapter Eight) are argued to account for the lack of monetary and non-monetary incentive systems that can drive quality. The shortage of financial and material resources poses a formidable obstacle for providing an adequate incentive scheme that is capable of significantly transforming the attitude and behaviour of higher education institutions and their academic communities in favour of improving quality standards. The evidence obtained from Wollo University indicates that the plans to reward departments and their academic staff members with bonus pay and certificates for performing well in the implementation of quality assurance could not be implemented because the budget needed for such incentives was denied approval from the university management due to perceived conflicts with institutional financial regulations.

No significant practice of certification

The data indicated HERQA's limited use of certification for accreditation evaluations and the absence of official quality labels in quality audits. The review of the documents from Admas University and Sheba University College indicated that HERQA issues official letters to attest the accreditation and reaccreditation permit granted to their programmes. This letter specifies the title of the programme, mode of delivery (regular, evening, weekend, distance), name of institution, name and location of campus, period of validity of the permit, type and level of programme (undergraduate or graduate) and number of students approved for enrolment. Granting an accreditation permit, however, does not guarantee that the institution in question has no quality problems. The letter certifying the accreditation permit also specifies the aspects that need to be improved by the institution. HERQA uses these comments as a starting point to determine whether the accreditation license will be renewed in the future. The agency, however, has not yet started issuing quality labels to institutions upon the completion of quality audits.

Higher education institutions use the letter of accreditation and reaccreditation permits to advertise their programmes and attract potential students. HERQA requires private institutions to post these letters on their notice board to ensure transparency and enable students to confirm the accreditation status of the programmes in which they wish to enrol. The agency also disseminates a list of institutions, along with their programmes, to which it has granted accreditation permits in order to raise the awareness of stakeholders and safeguard the public from fraudulent private institutions that provide education without accreditation. Moreover, the respondents from Sheba University College also revealed that the letters of accreditation permits were useful for securing an international capacity-building project with a partner from Germany. In general, the formal letter serves as a proof of license and lawful operation.

A commercial/business license that is obtained from the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the accreditation permit from HERQA are necessary for enrolling students and providing education, which would otherwise be a crime. These formalities attest that an institution has fulfilled the minimum quality standards necessary for providing training in specific programmes. The agency does not recognise private institutions that do not have a valid business license as lawful entities.

Moreover, the data showed that Admas University has been awarded certifications of appreciation and recognition from the Ethiopian Quality Awards

Organisation (EQA) and an International Quality Summit Award for its commitment to quality, leadership and the pursuit of excellence. It is worth noting that only a few higher education institutions compete for such national and international quality awards.

Previous deception and violation of regulations reinforce suspicion, vigilance and strict evaluations

The focus group discussions with the audit and accreditation experts from HERQA indicated that experiences of previous evaluations and encounters with deception and dishonest reporting tend to inform the expectations of the evaluators and the thoroughness and approach of subsequent evaluations. The respondents from HERQA shared the view that the previous deceptive behaviour exhibited by private higher education institutions and the expectation that they will engage in similar activities significantly determine how the experts of HERQA and other external members of the evaluation team conduct their evaluation.

This evidently suggests that the attitude, vigilance and technique with which accreditation experts from the agency approach current and future evaluations are shaped by their prior experience and organisational knowledge accumulated over time and shared with each other regarding the perceived trustworthiness of higher education institutions and the common deception tactics employed by them¹³⁶. For instance, the following excerpts taken from the focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA summarise how suspicion and low trust accumulated from previous experiences with evaluations may shape approaches in subsequent evaluations:

When we have information which shows previous attempts at deceiving our experts or when we have a tipoff or suspicion of our own that similar tendencies are present in an institution that we are planning to conduct an accreditation evaluation, we obviously go beyond our normal way of operation to try to triangulate every information presented to us including to the extent of checking the authenticity of the stamps put on some documents and books stored in libraries. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

¹³⁶ There seems to be a sort of informal blacklist of frequent offenders that accreditation and audit experts from HERQA appear to be aware about and that informs their preparation and vigilance while conducting on-site visits at these institutions. The experts from HERQA also actively share information regarding the deceptive tactics deployed by such institutions to warn their colleagues and the teams of evaluators responsible for accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations.

Another respondent added the following comment:

Our previous experience clearly informs our present and future methods of operation. How can I not be preoccupied with negative thoughts and prejudgements when I am going to a site visit at an institution whom I have previously caught deceiving accreditation experts and grossly violating regulations pertaining to quality of higher education? It's very difficult to avoid the influences from past experience. (HACC1, 04.10.2018)

Such arguments gathered from the focus group discussions provide insights into the impact that the previous experiences and reputations of institutions may have on shaping the manner in which the experts from HERQA approach present and future evaluations.

The widespread deception involving the profiles of the permanent academic staff members of private higher education institutions has forced HERQA to start checking the payroll records kept by the institutions of at least three to four months to confirm whether all the individuals whose profiles are presented to the evaluators are genuinely permanent employees. Later, when institutions started fabricating the payroll documents, HERQA made it compulsory for institutions to have each of their permanent staff members sign commitment forms and would request proof of these documents. The commitment form bears the photograph of the employee and states that they work full-time for the specific institution and that they are not engaged in any form of employment at another institution. Further, the form states that the employee acknowledges that they would be prosecuted by law if found to have violated the agreement. It was however reported that many institutions, including reputable ones, have also started fabricating these commitment forms, which further adds to the uneasiness of HERQA's experts.

Similarly, to ensure that books are not just borrowed from elsewhere for the sake of accreditation evaluations, HERQA has started requiring institutions to put their official stamps on books and other ICT laboratory tools. The teams of evaluators from HERQA now do not regard books as the property of the institution under evaluation if they do not bear the stamp of the institution on various pages. Moreover, the accreditation and reaccreditation experts of HERQA have begun to check the serial number of the computers found in the ICT demonstration facilities to prevent institutions from transferring and moving these resources around to present them at other locations.

Additionally, HERQA has conducted simultaneous visits as a measure to deter deception and counter information leakage. Such tactics involve HERQA sending up to six teams at once to conduct accreditation visits and sudden inspections at

multiple branch campuses belonging to the same private institution. Many private institutions responded to this by cancelling their appointments for undergoing an accreditation evaluation at some of their branch campuses, knowing that the approach used by HERQA would give them little chance to move equipment around. The examples discussed thus far also suggest that private higher education institutions are gradually improving their tactics as they gain more experience on how to successfully deceive HERQA's evaluators and circumvent the minimum quality standards stipulated by the accreditation requirements.

Aside from reinforcing their vigilance and caution, the data also pointed to the potential risks associated with the influence of previous experiences. Some respondents cited a challenge where HERQA's experts, in some cases, tend to lack objectivity due to biases, pessimistic expectations and negative preconceptions regarding institutions before they conduct the evaluations. In certain cases, some experts admitted to approaching institutions with a negative mindset and preconceived notions, even though these institutions may have actually improved their behaviour and quality of operations since the previous evaluations. This is argued to partially be the result of the active interpersonal communication and sharing of information and experiences regarding higher education institutions among the HERQA experts.

On balance, the respondents from HERQA acknowledge that higher education institutions can improve their commitment to quality and quality assurance but emphasised that they approach accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations at institutions that have a previous record of deception with caution and vigilance until the evaluations produce solid evidence to confirm that the institutions have markedly improved. The data indicated the existence of some institutions that have developed in the right direction from having a background of unlawful and deceptive operation.

Sudden and unannounced inspections to deter the violation of regulations

The use of sudden and announced inspections by HERQA, mostly to control, regulate and monitor private higher education institutions, seems to reflect the widespread suspicion and low trust that HERQA has towards a majority of private higher education institutions. The data gathered from the interviews, focus group discussions and documents highlight that surprise visits are usually conducted based on a lead or reasonable suspicion. These visits are mainly needed to prevent private higher education institutions from moving their equipment and facilities to other locations after undergoing on-site accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations by

evaluators from HERQA. Despite the strategic objectives of HERQA for 2015-2020 showing the agency's consideration to undertake sudden visits at both public and private higher education institutions (HERQA, 2015), such visits are, in practice mainly implemented for private institutions. The researcher could not find any documents or other types of data that would confirm that public higher education institutions have been subjected to unannounced visits by HERQA with an objective to arrest irresponsible operation and take the necessary corrective measures. Currently, the majority of the external quality assurance evaluations and on-site assessments are announced and agreed on beforehand with higher education institutions.

The legal services unit of HERQA plays a key role in supporting sudden inspections, gathering evidence from the premises of the higher education institutions under such inspections and, when necessary, organising evidence and filing cases in the court of law on behalf of HERQA against those institutions that are caught grossly violating regulations. HERQA first gathers the initial information and available evidence about the higher education institutions that are suspected of engaging in unlawful activities and violating regulations. The evidence is assessed by the legal affairs office, and, if believed to be compelling, HERQA then obtains a subpoena with the support of the legal affairs office. The experts from HERQA visit the premises of the institution in question armed with the subpoena and exercise their legal authority to conduct inspections and confiscate documents and other types of evidence. The legal services unit provides counselling and overall support to HERQA's teams of experts when they go to private higher education institutions to conduct surprise inspections based on a lead or suspicions of their engagement in unlawful activities.

The respondents from HERQA reported that they prioritise their surprise inspections for activities that are considered to have substantial detrimental consequences for the wellbeing of the stakeholders and society. According to the data gathered from the focus group discussions, one such priority is when a specific higher education institution is suspected of having secured accreditation and reaccreditation permits by presenting equipment and facilities to HERQA's evaluators that were allegedly rented or borrowed from other institutions and that the institutions actually delivers its programmes without these necessary inputs. Another example is of private higher education institutions that are suspected of enrolling students who do not meet the entry criteria for higher education that is approved by the Ministry of Education. In such cases, the team conducting the surprise visit search for the student records of the institutions.

Despite the necessity of conducting surprise inspections at private higher education institutions to deter the rampant violation of regulations, HERQA has not been able to carry out an adequate number of these types of evaluations due to capacity limitations. While the number of private higher education institutions has continued to increase rapidly, the human resources of HERQA have not grown at a corresponding rate. In fact, the respondents from HERQA stated that, due to the acute shortage of human resources, the agency first discontinued conducting surprise visits and, later, institutional quality audits since 2017. The agency has since concentrated its entire focus on accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations.

In addition to the capacity limitations, the effectiveness of the sudden visits had been markedly undermined due to the alleged intentional leaking of information regarding imminent inspections by certain corrupted and unprofessional HERQA experts and the rapid spreading of the information among private higher education institutions. These challenges negated the element of surprise, which is key for such unannounced inspections. Furthermore, some respondents revealed that resistance, confrontation and refusal to grant entrance into premises have been common challenges faced by the teams of evaluators from HERQA while conducting surprise visits at some private institutions.

Administrative and legal measures against the violations of regulations

According to the interviews with its legal affairs unit and the focus group discussions with the accreditation and audit experts, HERQA does not take all cases involving the violation of regulations to court. Instead, in most cases, it issues a formal warning. This is followed by forcing institutions to cease unlawful activities and undertake the corrective measures determined by HERQA. If institutions fail to do so, HERQA resorts to closing programmes and, in extreme cases, campuses and institutions in their entirety. A review of the performance of Ethiopian universities in Science and Technology by a panel of internal experts commissioned by the World Bank found that, not long ago, HERQA closed five private higher education institutions and several programmes and put another 11 institutions on probation (Salmi et al., 2017). Similarly, HERQA reported that it has carried out an extensive inspection of private higher education institutions in the 2018/19 academic year, which led to the closure of 18 campuses that were operating without an accreditation license in Addis Ababa and the regional states of Amhara, Tigray and Oromia (Hussien, 2019c). Most of these institutions were found to be providing illegitimate higher education services with licences obtained from the authorities to run, such as

retail businesses, garages, import and export companies and other ordinary business operations. To give an example of a measure taken against an institution covered in this study, the interviews and a review of media reports showed that HERQA closed the Nursing, Health Officer and Pharmacy programmes of Medco Bio-Medical College in 2016 due to the college failing to meet the minimum quality standards required for securing the respective reaccreditation permits (Mohammed, 2016). As the data suggested, the case of Medco Bio-Medical College seems to reflect the existence of a markedly turbulent, unstable and mutually distrustful relationship between HERQA and private higher education institutions, which stems from controversies associated with compromised quality standards.

The legal affairs unit mostly issues warnings to institutions that, for instance, enrol more students than the limit approved in their accreditation and reaccreditation permits. In many cases, HERQA forces these institutions to fulfil the necessary inputs that can accommodate the extra students rather than forcing the institutions to dismiss these students, as such a measure could cause social, economic and psychological crisis for those students. The institutions that violate regulations associated with student recruitment and admission are forced to dismiss the illegible students who did not meet the national entry criteria, and HERQA issues warnings to other private institutions to refrain from enrolling these students.

Meanwhile, the respondents from HERQA also expressed concern over the lack of self-restraint and fear of negative consequences at private institutions even after having gotten caught violating regulations and trying to be deceptive during accreditation evaluations. Some respondents associated this absence of concern at such institutions with the lack of systematic mechanisms at HERQA for recording these incidents and using the information as an input to inform subsequent visits. It was reported that those private institutions that were caught trying to be deceptive and whose applications for accreditation were rejected, in many instances, have made minor adjustments to their names and programmes and reopened as new institutions.

The Interviews and focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA revealed that taking cases to court and suing institutions is often regarded as a secondary option by the agency. As such, only those violations of the regulations that the agency considers to be severe and detrimental are taken to court. These violations, for instance, include higher education institutions (including those partnering with an overseas institution) that are caught having enrolled students without the necessary accreditation and reaccreditation permits. According to the interview with the legal affairs unit of HERQA, the agency considers this as one of

the most serious violations, which is unfortunately becoming more common. The respondents recalled an incident where HERQA had filed a lawsuit against the owner of a private institution who had been caught delivering programmes for three years without accreditation permit, which resulted in a conviction that involved a fine and a prison sentence. Another example of a serious violation is the forgery of accreditation and reaccreditation permits by private institutions that operate in remote areas that are less accessible to HERQA. In cases where violations of regulations and engagement in deceptive behaviour are suspected, the legal affairs unit of HERQA provides legal guidance to the accreditation experts and leadership of the agency, facilitates surprise inspections at the premises of the suspected higher education institutions, represents the agency in lawsuits and litigations, and proposes and negotiates the appropriate administrative measures to be taken.

On one hand, the legal services unit of HERQA argues that the administrative and legal measures taken against an institution that is engaged in unlawful activities are expected to deter the institution from continuing to do so and serve as a lesson for other institutions. The punishments can range from fines to jail time for the owners of such institutions. It was reported that HERQA has won all the cases, except one, that it has filed against institutions.

On the other hand, several respondents from HERQA and the selected researchers and experts from the area of quality assurance argue that the agency has not taken adequately stringent and rigorous measures against the higher education institutions that violate regulations and engage in deceptions. HERQA is argued to have fallen short in terms of strictly enforcing the regulations and mandates that have been entrusted to it. Moreover, the respondents criticised the lack of the determination of HERQA's leadership to issue adequate and exemplary administrative measures against repeat offenders. The overall effectiveness of the agency's ways of responding to such unethical activities have been questioned frequently. In some cases, the respondents described instances where such institutions had been granted accreditation permits by the decision of the agency's leadership—based on the fact that the other minimum requirements had been fulfilled—despite being caught engaging in serious deceptions by the teams of evaluators.

Nevertheless, HERQA recognises that preventing such violations from taking place and safeguarding the interests of the stakeholders and society is the primary objective rather than taking corrective measures against those institutions that violate regulations and engage in illegal activities. The agency, however, lacks the adequate human resources required to properly implement such preventive measures. Further,

many of the respondents from HERQA who took part in the focus group discussions interestingly shared the view that effectively and strictly enforcing regulations may result in the closure of a considerable majority of private institutions and would leave only a handful in operation. Such arguments imply a certain degree of complacency on the part of HERQA's experts.

Recent developments in the approaches to deter deception

The recent discussion between the parliament's standing committee for human resources and technology issues, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and HERQA stressed that the agency needs to continue carrying out frequent and sudden inspections for private higher education institutions and actively inform the public about the measures taken to deter the violations of quality regulations (HERQA, 2019e). This however requires HERQA to devise mechanisms that can facilitate active collaboration with key stakeholders in the higher education sector.

Another recent development is that a committee of experts and the legal affairs officer from HERQA and the representatives of private higher education institutions have drafted a guideline for ethical practices to deter the violation of regulations and promote the development of a culture of responsible operation (Wolde, 2019). HERQA has also drafted a document aimed at providing resolutions for various problems related to the private higher education sector. The document consists of information about the types of the common violations of regulations committed by private institutions, the causes of these violations, the encountered challenges, the solutions to tackle these violations of regulations, the expected outcomes and the risks associated with the proposed solutions. Certain respondents however expressed their fear that some of these resolutions may force private institutions into further complex situations and engagements in deception. Moreover, HERQA has organised forums that brought together the stakeholders in higher education to discuss how to prevent the violation of the regulations for quality and restore the public's trust in private higher education institutions (HERQA, 2019c).

In addition to this, HERQA has started to actively notify private higher education institutions to strictly adhere to the regulations for quality. Further, it actively provides information regarding institutions that are engaged in unlawful practices to students and other key stakeholders (HERQA, 2018b, 2018c). The agency also publishes a list of accredited private higher education institutions, their study programmes and specific campuses to inform students and protect them from getting deceived by fraudulent institutions (HERQA, 2018d). The agency uses

various media outlets to urge students to check the accreditation status of private higher education institutions before enrolling into any programme (HERQA, 2018a).

In August 2020, HERQA inaugurated a digitised information management and tracing system developed in partnership with the Technology Innovation Institute to modernise the process of applying for accreditation and address the existing problems in HERQA's outdated information management practices (EPA, 2020a; HERQA, 2020f, 2020g, 2020h, 2020i). HERQA and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education recognise that the absence of a digital information management system has adversely affected the quality and relevance of higher education and exacerbated the illegal activities and violations of regulations in the private sector (HERQA, 2020f, 2020i). The new information management platform is expected to enable the agency to process applications for accreditation efficiently and promptly, monitor and follow up on whether private institutions are operating in adherence with their accreditation and reaccreditation permits, monitor the list and profile of students who enrol into and graduate from every private institution, regulate the location, branch campuses, programmes delivered and number of students and academic staff, and gather up-to-date, accurate and reliable information transparently from private institutions to facilitate effective decision-making (EPA, 2020a; HERQA, 2020f, 2020g, 2020h, 2020i). This system aims to prevent the intentional distortion of information undertaken by many private institutions, for instance, while reporting on their number of graduates. It also seeks to enable private institutions to apply for, receive and renew their accreditation permits online.

Interestingly, this modern information management system was developed largely considering private institutions. As such, the data from media reports found no explicit intentions or planning on the part of HERQA to utilise this information management system to support the activities of public institutions and facilitate external quality audits. The agency has also announced a plan to pilot the system for 10 selected private institutions¹³⁷ (HERQA, 2020j). The review of recent media reports suggested that the ultimate goal of this system seems to be to support HERQA to better regulate and monitor the operations of private higher education institutions and prevent them from engaging in illegal activities. The system is expected to be implemented in the 2020/21 academic year.

¹³⁷ These consists of four full-fledged universities (including Admas University) and six university colleges (including Sheba University College). HERQA has issued a letter that instructs these private institutions to undertake preparatory work for the application of the system and requests their cooperation to be extended to its experts, who will be sent out to gather information. The letter however does not state how and why these institutions were selected.

9.1.2 Strong trust and reliance on perceived shared values and reputation

Shared values and norms between HERQA and higher education institutions

As discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework, the normative-cognitive perspective on trust building and insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust suggest that when trust is perceived to be relatively strong, actors may tend to rely on shared values and norms. This entails the existence of more interest in shared patterns of values, reputation and persuasion rather than in control and regulation instruments. The teams of accreditation and audit experts from HERQA expect the concern for quality and quality assurance to come from within higher education institutions. HERQA considers the establishment of congruence in the internalised values and norms of operation with the higher education institutions that truly value high quality and responsible operations as a strategically desirable goal to be realised. The agency attaches greater significance to the intrinsic motivation of higher education institutions to safeguard quality, meet the minimum quality requirements and operate responsibly rather than the institutions doing so as a result of the agency's external regulation, monitoring and policing. However, the analysis of the focus group discussions, interviews and relevant documents revealed the existence of generally weak shared values and norms between HERQA and higher education institutions regarding the quality and quality assurance of higher education.

As the discussion presented in Chapter Eight showed, the data analysis found a significant convergence between HERQA and higher education institutions with regard to the formally stated intentions articulated in strategic documents. However, marked divergences were identified in the substantive concern and tangible commitments that public and private higher education institutions have regarding quality. In most cases, the level of the tangible commitment that higher education institutions demonstrated with respect to establishing, supporting and implementing internal quality assurance activities was found to markedly fall short of the stated commitment to quality.

The evidence obtained from the analysis of the studied institutions showed that HERQA perceives public institutions in a significantly positive and optimistic light and as institutions whose primary objective is to provide good quality academic services to society. In contrast, the agency tends to have relatively negative and pessimistic expectations from a majority of the private institutions and considers them as fundamentally driven by profit-maximisation motives that precede academic

interests. These widespread perceptions among the accreditation and audit experts from HERQA seem to imply an identification and recognition, on the part of the agency, of the existence of relatively better shared values and norms on quality and quality assurance with public higher education institutions. Further, it also indicates its tendency to consider the institutional and operational value structure of most private institutions, with few exceptions such as Admas University, as being significantly at odds with concerns for quality. As discussed in the previous chapter, this seems to be further underpinned by a prevalent sense of the in-group identity shared by HERQA and the public institutions of belonging to a similar category of public organisations and by a tendency of estranging, othering and antagonising most private institutions.

Such contrasting perspectives seem to be shared by the respondents from the case higher education institutions, the governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and the selected researchers from the area of quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education. It is widely argued that most private institutions lack sufficient intrinsic commitment that is needed to ensure the quality of the services they provide to stakeholders, and it is further anticipated that, in contrast to their public counterparts, these institutions would likely severely compromise quality standards at the expense of pursuing business and profit-generating interests without HERQA's instruments of external restraints. All the respondents agreed regarding the necessity of HERQA's external evaluation and supervision for regulating and preventing investors from opening private colleges solely to generate profits without the awareness, willingness and capacity to ensure the quality of their education, research and community services. Currently, the respondents from HERQA reported their observations that an increasing number of private institutions are granting admission to students without securing the proper accreditation permits from HERQA. These institutions tend to then apply for the relevant permits after they have verified and confirmed the profitability of the business. The weak academic culture of private higher education institutions has also been noted in some previous studies (e.g. Yirdaw, 2014, 2016).

Despite the positive perception of HERQA's experts towards public higher education institutions, the empirical evidence from the studied public institutions showed that they are yet to develop and internalise strong values on quality, albeit that the situation is markedly better than that at private institutions. Some previous studies also found that quality, beyond bold claims and hollow words, has not been tangibly internalised within the fabric and core value system of Ethiopian public

higher education institutions (Abebe, 2014; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kabsay, 2012; Yirdaw, 2014, 2016).

With regard to other institutional values, HERQA claims to commit itself to a set of strategic, organisational, operational and individual values in its strategic document, whose content seems to be roughly centred around the issues of credibility and stakeholder satisfaction (HERQA, 2006a). The agency aspires that the operations of its experts should be underpinned by these values. Moreover, HERQA has published a revised set of values for its strategic objectives for 2015-2020, which includes nine values, namely quality, public accountability, credibility, professionalism, client satisfaction, transparency, fairness, professional integrity and ethics and teamwork (HERQA, 2015, p. 3)¹³⁸. The agency has adopted these values to guide operations at the organisational and individual-expert levels.

On the other hand, most of the case higher education institutions, except Sheba University College, have sets of clearly articulated institutional values that have been adopted to underpin the desired internal institutional environment and working culture. In most cases, these values seem to be compatible with the respective institutional vision and mission statements¹³⁹.

A comparison of the institutional values adopted by HERQA and those of the case higher education institutions suggested a general convergence of stated values that focus on quality, integrity and professionalism, respect and collaboration with stakeholders. The acknowledgement of the importance of striving for high quality standards and of the need to urgently address quality problems can be regarded as shared intentions and values. The shared values extend to the objective of producing competent, knowledgeable and skilled citizens who are capable of serving society and contributing to national development. These values are complementary to the policy directives set by the Ministry of Education and other government bodies. The respondents from the studied higher education institutions argued that the shared concerns for quality, relevance to national development needs, customer satisfaction and stakeholder participation are some of the values that the institutions share with HERQA. They also acknowledged that quality assurance has enabled them to identify their strengths and the areas that needed development. Other important common values include an understanding that cooperation between HERQA and higher education institutions and the development of a healthy relationship between them are crucial for enabling the improvement of quality in higher education. This could enable them to collaborate to identify the root causes of problems and

¹³⁸ A description of HERQA's key values is presented in appendix 6.

¹³⁹ A list of values adopted by the studied higher education institutions can be found in appendix 7.

implement measures to arrest the falling quality standards and gradually enhance quality. The data indicated awareness regarding the fact that a relationship based on mutual suspicion and a lack of respect would not be healthy or sustainable.

As highlighted in Chapter Eight, the data gathered from HERQA and case higher education institutions indicated that these stated values are not essentially translated into action nor adequately demonstrated through tangible commitment to the desired core values such as quality. For instance, the empirical evidence from this study showed that quality is far from being truly valued at the studied higher education institutions, with the significant exception of Admas University. The institutional practices, procedures and processes that are employed for assuring and enhancing the quality standards of education, research and community services, in most cases, lack adequate attention, necessary resources, managerial support and acceptance from the academic staff. As shown in the previous chapter, such challenges tend to be more acute at the studied private institutions, such as Medco Bio-Medical College and Sheba University College.

The empirical evidence from the case higher education institutions suggested a trend wherein departments and academic units seem to focus on those procedures of quality assurance that they think are simpler to undertake and would consume less time, such as checklists that prompt short 'yes' and 'no' types of assessment while ignoring and, at times, rejecting tasks that require detailed evaluations and explanations that need to be properly supported with evidence. Most departments at the studied higher education institutions possess awareness regarding the significance of quality in higher education, but there are gaps in the practical implementation and translation of their understanding into concrete actions. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was attributed to limitations in knowledge, experience, commitment and a sense of ownership and the shortage of the resources needed for providing quality education and implementing quality assurance. This highlights that such complementarity in the stated values does not accurately reflect the manner in which quality is valued and nurtured at higher education institutions in actuality. Such stated intentions and values regarding quality seem to considerably lack the capacity to concretely shape institutional behaviour. The same can be said about understanding the adverse consequences that compromising quality standards has for the wellbeing, safety and development of society and practically taking necessary measures to prevent these problems. Given this situation, the respondents indicated that entrusting the responsibility for safeguarding the quality of education entirely to institutions could likely create negative consequences for the standards and credibility of higher education.

Previous encounters with commitment to quality facilitate an optimistic and trusting approach

Just as previous encounters with deception and violations of regulations induce vigilance and caution, the focus group discussions with the audit and accreditation experts from HERQA revealed that experiences with responsible operations and a concrete commitment to safeguarding quality facilitate more optimistic expectations, a positive attitude and a trusting and relaxed approach for the subsequent evaluations of such institutions. The data showed that experts from HERQA, when assessing a few higher education institutions that they trust more and are less suspicious of regarding engagement in deceptive behaviour, tend to focus on ensuring that the requirements are fulfilled without going deeper into triangulating and cross-checking the information in detail. They also show more interest in providing support. In such cases, the team of evaluators perceive a lesser need for gathering additional information from various groups on campus and the people living in the vicinity of campus premises under evaluation, which they often do when they suspect foul play. The following excerpt taken from a focus group discussion with the team of accreditation experts describes the optimistic expectations and less stringent approaches that HERQA's experts tend to draw on when evaluating higher education institutions that they consider to have reputation for responsible operation and commitment to quality:

When we go to visit private higher education institutions who have reputation for responsible operation and commitment for quality in higher education, we tend to take a bit less intense approach. We in fact try to be more supportive to these institutions rather than focusing on control, as we often do at other notorious institutions. I have noticed that we tend to be more positive towards responsible institutions even if we find some gaps and weaknesses in their operation. At times, we incline to interpret their weaknesses as arising more from the insufficient support our agency provides to them than their negligence or calculated attempts to minimise cost and maximise profit. I have to be honest that we feel happy when we know that we are going to evaluate responsible institutions. We know that we also learn from these institutions. The conversations we have with their staff are often professional and respectful. I have also noticed that our level of expectation towards these institutions is often higher than other average institutions. I feel like we don't go there to evaluate them or control. Instead we go there to encourage and motivate them to improve further. (HACC1, 04.10.2018)

Admas University, from the studied private higher education institutions, was found to provide a notable example of a situation in which a relatively trusting approach was employed for an institution by HERQA. This seems to be facilitated by the

accumulated positive prior experiences of the agency's experts and the overall perceived image they have developed over time of Admas University, which was reported to have established trust regarding the university's commitment to quality and responsible operation. The respondents from HERQA reported a tendency of taking a less rigorous and cautious approach when undertaking accreditation and audit evaluations at Admas University in consideration of the common positive perception on its high commitment to quality and progress in implementing well-established and functioning internal quality assurance. Similarly, the respondents from Admas University stated that HERQA's experts request for evidence during accreditation and audit evaluations mainly for confirmation and the formality of validation and have confidence that the university reports its achievements and areas of weakness honestly in self-evaluation documents that are submitted to the agency. This positive outlook can protect the established trust from being eroded due to minor gaps, weaknesses and irregularities that may be found during evaluations. This also encourages experts from HERQA to provide more constructive feedback and support to the university so that it can continue to further improve its standards. The data analysis espoused the view that Admas University has developed trustworthiness and an image of quality among HERQA, the Ministry of Education and other important stakeholders actively involved in the quality assurance of higher education in Ethiopia.

The data further revealed concerns that certain private higher education institutions, whom the experts of the agency perceive to be responsibly operating institutions, have, on occasion, abused their trust. This has led to the relationship with these institutions subsequently declining into mutual suspicion. During the focus group discussions with the audit experts, the respondents recalled a case where a reputable private higher education institution was caught having enrolled students in nine programmes without having renewed the respective accreditation permits. The respondents further highlighted that, as in several other cases, the owner of the institution may have planned to proceed with graduating students and, later, attempt to pressure HERQA and the Ministry of Education to validate and grant recognition to the degree certificates issued to these students. After this incident of deception had unfolded, it was reported that the experts from HERQA who were assigned to evaluate that specific institution began taking extra measures to cross-check and thoroughly assess the focus areas of evaluations during subsequent accreditation visits. Such findings reiterate that the behaviour of higher education institutions regarding the adherence to regulations and minimum quality standards seems to influence the way experts from HERQA execute accreditation evaluations.

Reputation for quality informs the trust and the nature of relationship with HERQA

The reputation built by an institution through its accumulated previous records of quality assurance achievements seem to play a role in shaping the nature of the relationship it has with HERQA. The interviews from the studied higher education institutions suggested that when an institution develops a good reputation for quality and high performance, the agency is likely to consider it as a responsible and relatively more trustworthy institution. As a result, the relationship shared between the two can improve significantly. In contrast to private institutions, HERQA, despite being cognisant of the significant quality problems present at these institutions, clearly trusts public institutions more, which could be partly based on its belief that they share its concerns and desired goals regarding quality and quality assurance. The data from the focus group discussions, interviews and documents evidently suggested that most private higher education institutions have a reputation for pursuing profits at the expense of quality, lacking the adequate capacity to assure quality, frequently violating the regulations for quality, engaging in dishonest reporting and deception and having weak trustworthiness with regard to operating responsibly on their own without the accreditations, audits and other external quality regulations enforced by HERQA. Consistent with such views, the respondents from the studied private higher education institutions, such as those from Sheba University College, admitted to be struggling to strike a balance between generating profits and safeguarding quality standards.

These contrasting perceptions of trustworthiness seem to be significant with regard to the fact that HERQA has considerably smooth and stable relations with public higher education institutions, whereas its relations with most private institutions tend to be characterised by tension, vigilance and, at times, confrontation. HERQA tends to perceive private higher education institutions as threats to the quality and standards of higher education and, thus, tightens its regulations and control over them while employing a more relaxed approach with public institutions. Even though HERQA does not conduct similar evaluations at public and private institutions, there is a prevalent understanding that the external quality evaluations of HERQA tend to be more supportive of institutional improvements for public institutions while having a predominantly controlling and regulatory orientation for private institutions. HERQA does not have a strict and suspicious outlook towards public institutions as it does for private institutions. As a result, the agency actively monitors and interacts more with private institutions than public ones. Most of the respondents from Mekelle University, Wollo

University and Woldia University reported that it has been a few years since HERQA conducted evaluations or monitoring visits at their campus premises and provided feedback for improvement. The Ministry of Education, in contrast, carries out annual on-site supervision and monitoring at public institutions.

Certain respondents raised concerns that the increasing engagement of public higher education institutions in tuition-based non-regular programmes that are delivered through evening, weekend and distance classes can erode the trust of HERQA owing to the complex quality problems they pose. In fact, these respondents shed light on concerns over the quality of the graduates that these public institutions are producing, thus challenging the widespread notion of regarding public institutions as being generally more trustworthy than private institutions with regard to quality.

Interestingly, the analysis of the data seems to imply that building a positive reputation with regard to quality and quality assurance seems to be more visibly relevant in the context of private higher education institutions than public ones. There can be at least three explanations for this. First, as seen from the perspective of the respondents from HERQA, there is a tendency of attributing more of a kind of category-based, primarily positive reputation to public institutions and a negative reputation to most private institutions despite a few exceptions. These views suggest that the form and level of the reputation accorded to public institutions is not overtly specific to the characteristics of individual institutions, as the positive outlook appears to be less of a product of specific institutional performance and more of simply being a public entity. This implies that reputation does not seem to be a key factor that would markedly shape how audit experts from HERQA may distinguish one public institution from another. Second, it could be argued that more disciplinary and institutional diversification exists among private institutions than public ones due to their focus on providing demand-driven programmes. In contrast, public institutions tend to be generic in their strategic and operational character and provide comprehensive education and training with an underexploited potential for specialising in selected fields and growing into centres of excellence. This suggests that each private institution has relatively more room for building and earning positive reputation and recognition in the eyes of HERQA by increasingly demonstrating their commitment to quality and responsible operation. As a result, private institutions, such as Admas University, as demonstrated by the data, have made significant progress in gradually establishing a relatively robust reputation and image for quality among stakeholders. In contrast, HERQA does not seem to demand a similar level of commitment from public institutions. This may partly

explain why the data from the studied public institutions found gaps in their tangible commitment and, at times, negligence of the responsibility for assuring and improving quality and quality assurance. Third, the competition for students and academic staff exists only among private higher education institutions, whereas their public counterparts receive nearly full budget from the government, host students centrally assigned to them by the Ministry of Education and secure their academic staff mostly from their own graduates and fellow public institutions. This indicates the presence of more developed trends of competition among private institutions where reputation has more significance than among public higher education institutions.

Perceived reputation of the case higher education institutions

All the studied higher education institutions aspire to become leading higher education institutions, attain international visibility and contribute to solving the socio-economic challenges of society. Interestingly, all these institutions claim to have built a good reputation for quality despite the lack of evidence and unclear role of their institutional quality assurance and enhancement practices. Unlike the other case institutions, the interviews from Mekelle University and Admas University reflected institutional beliefs that highlight the need to assess and ensure, using quality assurance procedures, whether their vision, core missions and strategic objectives are effectively achieved in a manner that fulfils the national and international standards. This implies the understanding of the significance of assessing whether the institution is providing community-focused services, undertaking problem-solving research, producing quality graduates and contributing to national development.

The empirical evidence presented below reveals the nuances in the specific features of operation across the studied public and private institutions that are claimed to have underpinned the perceived positive reputations and images. For example, Mekelle University takes pride in being among the top three first-generation public universities in certain annual national quality competitions. The respondents attributed the perceived reputation of Mekelle University as being the main factor for it becoming a destination for peer learning and exchange of experience visits from, for instance, Hawassa University and Wolaita Sodo University to learn about the implementation of internal quality assurance system. Wollo University, on the other hand, claims to have a reputation for being a peaceful institution where political and ethnic violence rarely occurs, while other universities

are commonly ravaged by such instability and forced to interrupt their operations. The peaceful teaching-learning environment and hospitable and receptive culture of the region was credited for attracting experienced teaching staff with doctorate degrees from other universities. Additionally, the respondents stated that Wollo University has received positive recognition for its student support services, music and theatre art programmes, revenue-generating enterprises and the quadrilateral forum in which the university works closely with the local municipality and key regional administrations. Moreover, the interviews stated that representatives from other higher education institutions have visited Woldia University to learn from its implementation of the principles of the Kaizen philosophy for organising its laboratory and library facilities and documentation practices. The respondents also claimed that the university, despite being a young third-generation public university, is gradually improving its image in society with regard to infrastructural development. This was argued to have increased the confidence that students, staff and the community place in Woldia University and has begun to reflect in the relationship the university has with external stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education.

The interviews and focus group discussions suggest that HERQA views Admas University in a substantially positive way and, as a result, seems to have developed trust in its commitment and capacity regarding quality and quality assurance, which is unlike the case for most private institutions. Admas University has adopted a value of ‘quality first’, which seeks to promote academic excellence, meaningful demand-driven research and community outreach services by internalising quality in all the tasks and daily activities of the university, as well as ensuring and nurturing the quality of staff and other educational inputs, processes and services. The accreditation and audit experts from HERQA consider the implementation of quality assurance at Admas University exemplary for both public and private higher education institutions. In fact, the respondents are largely aware of the fact that the internal quality assurance system of Admas University has been benchmarked by several higher education institutions, including more experienced first-generation public universities. In some cases, the staff of Admas University has provided training on quality assurance to the quality assurance officers of other higher education institutions. These developments seem to have gradually reinforced the positive reputation of the university. The respondents from Admas University credit its reputation for its inclusion in international projects such as the Sustainable Training and Education Programme (STEP) implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Moreover, Sheba University College claims to have built a positive image mainly in the region where it operates due to its years of experience, decent learning facilities and resources, increasing number of students and graduates, alumni serving in important positions, customer satisfaction and good academic foundation laid down by previous managers who had doctorate-level qualifications. The website of Sheba University College lists a number of awards that the institution has received from the regional administration for its contribution to the development of the region. Furthermore, the focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA and the interviews from Medco Bio-Medical College suggested that the college, as the first private higher education institution to provide training in health sciences in Ethiopia, had built a positive reputation over the last two decades for quality education and producing the graduates required in the labour market. This is claimed to have lasted until its relationship with HERQA became turbulent and confrontational, which subsequently weakened its image and scale of operation considerably. Interestingly, the positive image and reputation reported by Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College are not shared by the respondents from HERQA. This may reflect HERQA's prevalent suspicion and negative outlook on most private higher education institutions.

9.1.3 Public-private dichotomy: A reflection of the contrasting overall trustworthiness

Since HERQA cannot fully rely on institutions and the level of their intrinsic commitment to quality, it carries out institutional and programme quality audits and pre-accreditation, accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations. These assess whether higher education institutions meet the minimum quality standards and comply with the regulations and requirements stipulated by the higher education proclamation and determine their status and competence. The implementation of external quality assurance for public and private institutions is however different.

The data showed that HERQA's contrasting perception regarding the overall trustworthiness of public and private institutions and its corresponding dissimilar dispositions with regard to trust extend to implementing dichotomous external quality assurance requirements. Accordingly, private higher institutions are required to undergo accreditations and audits, whereas public ones are only required to be audited because they are considered to be automatically accredited upon their establishment by the virtue of decree. Most of the respondents described this

dichotomous approach as being ‘discriminatory’, ‘preferential’ and a ‘double standard’. The respondents argued that, in practice, such dichotomy shields public higher education institutions from the strict accreditation requirements defined by HERQA.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the dichotomous accreditation requirements for public and private institutions are not prescribed by the higher education proclamation (650/2009) but a result of HERQA’s distorted interpretation and implementation of the provisions set forth in the proclamation. This was highlighted in the interviews conducted with the selected researchers, the representative from the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions’ Association, a senior expert at Education Strategy Centre (ESC) and the focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA. Some previous studies also indicated the presence of such inconsistencies between the proclamation and its application (e.g. Nega, 2017). In fact, Article 87 of the proclamation states that the provisions of the proclamation concerning private higher education institutions shall, *mutatis mutandis*, be applicable for the accreditation of public institutions (FDRE, 2009). This suggests that the procedures of accreditation and reaccreditation specified for private higher education institutions can also be applicable for public institutions. Additionally, the selected researchers claimed that the tendency of the government to treat public and private entities differently may have roots in the socialism ideology of the military government (1974-1991), which promoted strong sentiments in favour of public organisations but prejudice, suspicion and a lack of support towards private organisations. This orientation may have inculcated a biased attitude and discriminatory treatment against private organisations.

Moreover, the interviews with the selected researchers and the former high-ranking official from the Ministry of Education emphasised that no explicit intentions of creating dichotomous external quality assurance requirements for public and private institutions were present when the initiative to establish HERQA was taken forward. The political sentiment at the Ministry of Education, however, seems to have gradually transformed over the years to favour strong control over private institutions and a relaxed approach towards public universities. Such arguments indicate the lack of comprehensive foresight at political level. Additionally, HERQA’s lack of independence partially accounts for its tendency to focus on regulating private institutions but not being empowered to take action against poor-quality public institutions.

The implementation of dichotomous quality assurance requirements for public and private higher education institutions could be seen as a reflection of the lack of

trust and prevailing suspicious attitude held by HERQA and the Ministry of Education towards the private sector. For instance, despite acknowledging that the processes of accreditation evaluations should primarily be built on trust, the international review of HERQA's operations found that its staff prefers a longer process of accreditation owing to their belief that it may prevent private higher education institutions from engaging in deceptive practices (Henson et al., 2016). The growing need for the agency to tightly regulate private institutions seems to arise from an attitude that quality concerns mainly exist in the private sector, which is largely attributed to their profit-maximisation motive, capacity limitations and widespread violations of regulations. These premises further depict public higher education institutions as guardians of quality, while, in practice, significant quality problems are evident in these institutions.

An interesting pattern that emerged through the data analysis was that the studied public institutions mainly see HERQA as a supportive agency that seeks to stimulate quality enhancement but, in the process, seems to neglect its duty for ensuring accountability. In contrast, the respondents from the studied private institutions, with a partial exception of Admas University, consider HERQA a controller and regulator with an emphasis on enforcing accountability. As such, HERQA is criticised for implementing an approach that is fundamentally geared towards serving the function of 'quality control' in the private sector and utilising procedures and processes that relate to 'quality improvement' in the public sector (Adamu & Addamu, 2012, p. 838). The interviews with the respondents from the studied private institutions, Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association and other non-governmental stakeholders and the selected researchers criticised that HERQA exercises more power over private institutions, while public institutions remain largely under-regulated, when it comes to ensuring their accountability towards the quality of their education, research and community service. All public higher education institutions receive funding from the government with little explicit demands for evidence regarding the quality of the services that they provide (Nega, 2017). Similarly, previous studies have criticised the current quality assurance system for its dichotomous approach with regard to subjecting public and private higher education institutions to dissimilar requirements, which impose stricter regulations on private higher education institutions while their public counterparts enjoy a more lenient approach (e.g. Adamu & Addamu, 2012; Akalu, 2014; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Lodesso, 2012; Tamrat, 2011; Woldetinsae, 2009).

In addition to compulsory accreditation, private higher education institutions have to strictly comply with the requirements regarding student admission, programme facilities, academic and administrative staff, programme curricula and course modules and the leadership and governance guidelines stipulated by the higher education proclamation and issued by HERQA and the Ministry of Education (Nega, 2017). Moreover, unlike public higher education institutions, Article 71 of the higher education proclamation (650/2009) subjects private higher education institutions to two levels of accountability: to the Ministry of Education, with respect to the propriety of their operations regarding the provision of education and conducting research and to the appropriate bodies as stated in their memorandum of association and their by-laws.

The data from the focus group discussions suggested that HERQA generally has more frequent interactions with private higher education institutions, unlike public institutions, since every programme they deliver needs to go through proper accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations. The programme accreditation¹⁴⁰ applied for private institutions is substantial and more recurrent than the institutional quality audits implemented for both public and private institutions. This arrangement, in practice, forces the agency to direct most of its focus and resources on monitoring, regulating and supervising the private sector (Geda, 2014; Salmi et al., 2017). The investment of resources by HERQA into pre-accreditation, accreditation and reaccreditation, which are only applicable for the private sector, is not balanced with the other activities that the agency is expected to carry out despite the fact that private higher education institutions only constitute about 16 per cent of the enrolment in higher education in Ethiopia, while the public institutions account for about 84 per cent of the total enrolment (Henson et al., 2016; HERQA, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2016)¹⁴¹. The concentration of the external quality assurance efforts on private institutions vividly indicates a mismanagement of already scant resources in a manner that overly fails to reflect the broader picture of the national higher education system.

Moreover, the results of accreditations and quality audits neither have similar implications nor can they allow HERQA to issue sanctions for both sectors. The agency can grant sanctions for private higher education institutions, including

¹⁴⁰ As indicated in Chapter Six, an international review found, that while accreditation is commonly based on past performance (as practiced internationally), the evaluation process HERQA regards as accreditation however is actually of 'licencing or registration', and the term 'pre-accreditation' would thus be a more accurate term (Henson et al., 2016, p. 13). This illustrates that the supposed accreditation evaluation implemented by HERQA significantly deviates from the standard practice.

¹⁴¹ Section 9.2.3 discusses the explanations that account for such trends in detail.

granting, renewing or revoking accreditation permits, at both the institutional and programme levels. Accreditation reviews bear direct and existential implications for private higher education institutions, whereas HERQA barely follows up on whether public institutions implement the recommendations that are forwarded in audit reports and enforce sanctions accordingly. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, HERQA has, on numerous occasions, shut down study programmes, suspended operational licenses and accreditation permits and issued warnings to private higher education institutions that were found to have violated regulations. The agency, however, rarely takes similarly strict measures against public higher education institutions. These institutions are not subjected to sanctions by HERQA. The actions of the agency for public institutions are mostly limited to publishing reports after auditing these institutions (Geda, 2014). The agency assigns the responsibility for developing enhancement plans and implementing the recommendations produced from the audits to the institutions without adequate enforcement (Tamrat, 2018).

These discriminatory accreditation practices have frequently raised questions regarding fairness, credibility, objectivity and conflict of interests, particularly when considering that both sectors contribute to the same labour market and national development needs. Similar concerns were highlighted in certain previous studies (e.g. Geda, 2014; Nega, 2017; Salmi et al., 2017). In a recent media coverage of the discussion held on the quality of higher education between HERQA and stakeholders, a representative from a private higher education institution complained:

I sometimes don't think that the government has trust in the education provided at private institutions. For example, training in teacher education and law are only permitted for public institutions. Such a policy is discriminatory against the private sector. I see it just like apartheid system. It aggravates the loss of trust in private institutions. (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018).

Another participant raised similar issues regarding fairness as follows:

For instance, training in architecture is given in more than 20 public universities. Some of these institutions are however newly established and fall short of standards set for academic staff, library, laboratory and other facilities necessary for providing quality education. Opening architecture programmes in circumstances where these conditions are not fulfilled could be justified by the Ministry as a directive but ensuring that such justification does not undermine quality requires the Ministry to critically evaluate public institutions. (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018).

The respondents cited some examples that illustrate the discriminatory practices implemented against private institutions and HERQA's lack of strict regulation over public institutions. For instance, the agency requires all private institutions seeking accreditation permits for undergraduate programmes to have a permanent academic staff consisting of two professionals with master's degrees and one with a bachelor's degree in a field that is relevant to the programme. However, staff members with only a bachelor's degree teach courses at numerous public universities, and no action is taken against them by HERQA. In addition to acquiring accreditation by HERQA, private institutions are required to secure a business and commercial registration license from the Commercial Registration and Business Licensing Directorate of the Ministry of Trade and Industry to be legally operational. Other examples of the restrictions which have been applied only for private higher education institutions under the pretext that they would prevent quality problems include the restrictions on the number of students per programme, the prohibition of providing training in law and teacher's education and the barring of diploma holders from continuing to degree programmes without the level four Centre of Competence (COC) examination. An additional example of the discriminatory practices reported by the respondents is of the Ministry of Health assigning only those graduates from the health science fields to public hospitals and health centres across the country who have studied in public institutions and excluding graduates of private institutions. Additionally, the respondents from the studied private institutions criticised the minimum requirements defined by HERQA pertaining to programme facilities and resources as being disproportionate and lacking congruence with market realities and those concerning student admissions and numbers, academic staff qualifications and nature of employment as being inconsistent and, at times, unattainable. Such complaints were also recorded in previous studies (e.g. Yirdaw, 2016).

In the existing structure of higher education, private higher education institutions lack an equal footing with public institutions, as the 'government policies and regulatory frameworks favour public institutions' (Nega, 2017, p. 598). This undermines healthy competition between the two given that the rules of the game are evidently not the same, and this negatively affects private institutions (Nega, 2017). An additional example of the discriminatory practices is that, unlike private institutions, the status of public institutions does not gradually evolve from a smaller institute to a college and, then, to a university college and, finally, a full-fledged university. All newly established public higher education institutions are automatically granted the status of a university right when the cornerstones for their construction are laid, since the Council of Ministers passes the resolution for their

establishment. Besides denying private institutions similar treatment, such practices seem to deprive public institutions of valuable experience and the gradual development of overall institutional capacity that is crucial for improving quality standards.

Providing additional background to such discriminatory practices, the interviews with the selected researchers illustrated an interesting contrast in the development of key legal frameworks. Accordingly, they argued that the higher education proclamation (351/2003) was drafted by the Ministry of Education with a relatively relaxed, supportive and encouraging sentiment to facilitate the expansion of private institutions, since, at the time, only a small number of private institutions existed and the degree of concern they posed to quality had not yet become alarming. In contrast, the revised proclamation (650/2009) was prepared amidst sentiments that were largely critical of private institutions. Certain provisions included in the proclamation reflected this negative sentiment. For example, the joint appointment of the teaching staff, which used to be allowed previously, was prohibited, and the admission of adult learners at private institutions was also restricted.

Despite public higher education institutions being immune by law of establishment to accreditation requirements or the approval of HERQA for regular programmes, a directive that bans public universities from delivering distance education outside their vicinity was introduced in 2016 (Aschalew, 2016). The directive was issued by the Ministry of Education and implemented through HERQA. Two main reasons were cited for introducing the directive. First, considerable shortcomings in quality were identified in the provision of distance education, which are associated with the poor organisation of programmes, inadequate resources at the satellite centres of training and the lack of sufficient support to students (Aschalew, 2016). Accordingly, HERQA has closed the distance education programmes of six public universities in the capital city, Addis Ababa, and those of other private higher education institutions following an overall review carried out in 2010. The review also brought changes to the previous system that authorised public universities to provide distance programmes without needing approval and permits from the agency. As a result, public higher education institutions, after 2010, were required to seek permission from the agency before engaging in distance education activities. Second, the directive to ban public universities from distance education was aimed at discouraging public universities from an undue inclination towards generating profit from tuition-based distance programmes, which could subsequently have adverse effects on the quality of their

regular programmes. The directive also restricted public institutions to providing distance education only in the social science fields.

The analysis of the relevant documents suggested that HERQA's dichotomous approach, which is based on its contrasting assessment of the relative trustworthiness of public and private institutions, seems to directly contradict its proclaimed values, such as that of being a trusted partner and impartial service provider. The value of having a trusted partnership stipulates that all relationships with stakeholders and individuals shall be based on trust, confidence, mutual respect and avoidance of possible conflicts of interest, while the delivering of transparent and impartial services seeks to ensure that HERQA's staff members pursue their professional responsibility based on the ideals of impartiality and equal treatment (HERQA, 2006a, pp. 6-7).

The double standard of HERQA for private and public higher education institutions also poses challenges for the development of an impartial, credible and balanced quality assurance system. Previous studies argued that such approaches of discriminating against private higher education institutions and favouring public institution merit reconsideration while prioritising the best interest of the development of higher education in Ethiopia (Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kahsay, 2012). The data also implied that placing emphasis on controlling private higher education institutions may coerce them into engaging in deception and other unethical practices to circumvent this barrier. The interviews revealed that the revision and abolishment of the dichotomous accreditation requirements have constituted one of the central longstanding issues that the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association has been advocating for years. All the respondents, including those from governmental stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and Education Strategy Centre (ESC), acknowledged the significance of such changes and of treating public and private institutions with equality. However, the political will needed to enforce these desired amendments seems to be inadequate.

The arguments found in media reports highlighted that subjecting public higher education institutions, particularly the young and newly established ones, to institution- and programme-level accreditation by HERQA could provide them with a valuable opportunity to strive towards ensuring that they fulfil the minimum threshold standards for quality (Woldetensae, 2009). Some of the selected researchers shared such ideas, but the interviews revealed that public institutions currently lack such opportunities.

9.2 The nature of the quality management model

In this section, the study presents the analysis of the data on the possible implications that the extent to which HERQA, as a quality assurance agency, trusts public and private higher education institutions in relation to quality and quality assurance may have for the nature of the quality management models in use in Ethiopian higher education.

As indicated in Chapter Five, the theoretical and analytical framework broadly categorises quality management models into accountability-oriented and enhancement-led models, as viewed on the basis of the underlying purpose they serve. The discussion of the implications for the nature of quality management models is structured around key themes such as the dynamics of the top-down and bottom-up initiatives through which quality assurance practices are established, the primary ownership of quality assurance processes, the main driving purpose and the priority regarding accountability and enhancement orientations, the focus areas of evaluation and assessment, the attention to quality enhancement and impact of quality assurance, and the extent of stakeholder engagement in quality assurance processes.

9.2.1 Dominance of top-down orientations in the establishment of quality assurance practices and structures

The review of the previous higher education proclamations provides useful insights into the historical background of internal and external regulations for quality in Ethiopian higher education. The higher education proclamation during the imperial administration (Haile Selassie-I University Charter no. 284/1961) relied on the internal mechanisms of higher education institutions for regulating standards and quality of education (Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1961, Art. 15), whereas the proclamation issued by the socialist military government (Higher Education Institutions Administration Proclamation no. 109/1977) marked a shift from the traditional internal practices of academic self-regulation entrusted to the academic management of higher education institutions to an external rigid regulation of quality and standards. As highlighted in Chapter Six, this could be seen as the period during which the practice of external control, regulation and monitoring of higher education institutions and their activities was engrained in the essence of Ethiopian higher education, which continues to exist to this day (Asgedom, 2008; Provisional Military

Administration Council, 1977). Accordingly, the proclamation played an important role in introducing the practice of externally regulating student recruitment and admission, the standards and conditions of granting degrees, the undertaking of education and research in accordance with national development plans, the establishment and cancellation of study programmes and, most importantly, the practice of accrediting higher education institutions and conducting periodic evaluations of these institutions.

The data from the interviews found mixed claims regarding the implementation of accreditation during the reigns of the pre-1991 governments and its role in the creation of HERQA. On one hand, the interviews with the selected researchers claimed that Addis Ababa University had the responsibility of accrediting other higher education institutions during the period of the imperial administration and the socialist military government. It was argued that the mandate was given upon the establishment of the university as Ethiopia's first higher education institution during the imperial administration to accredit all other higher education institutions that would later be established. The Higher Education Commission that existed during the time of the socialist military government was reported to have continued the practice of entrusting this responsibility to Addis Ababa University. On the other hand, the interviews conducted with a higher education expert from the Ministry of Education and a long-time quality audit expert from HERQA further claimed that certain early forms of accreditation activities existed within the Ministry of Education during the socialist military administration and that this accrediting unit, its experts and accumulated experience contributed to the establishment of HERQA in 2003. The experts also reported that only two private higher education institutions existed during the time of the socialist military government, which further explains why 'accreditation was not that functional' and did not expand further (GSMG2, 10.10.2018). While acknowledging the role of Addis Ababa University, another respondent who has served in a high-ranking position at the Ministry of Education during the reign of both the socialist military and the current governments argued that HERQA was not built on the experiences from the prior native practices of external quality regulation inherited from previous governments. They also argued that the agency was established by adopting international experiences, notably, from the UK and Australia. Despite such mixed claims and lack of ample documentary evidence to verify the merit of each argument, the data from the interviews evidently implies that the interest towards the external regulation of quality in higher education began to take hold during the rule of the socialist military government.

As far as the present system is concerned, a key pattern that emerged from the data analysis was the use of a strong top-down orientation by the Ministry of Education and HERQA in the establishment of quality assurance practices at higher education institutions rather than a bottom-up initiative. As briefly discussed in Chapter Six, the Ministry of Education introduced external quality assurance by establishing HERQA in 2003 as a national quality assurance agency with the support of the higher education proclamation (351/2003). The agency is tasked with the mandate to safeguard and supervise the relevance and quality of higher education and higher education institutions. Additionally, according to the interviews conducted with the selected researchers, the recommendations from the Higher Education Strategy Overhaul (HESO) conducted in 2004 drew attention to addressing the challenges related to quality and relevance in higher education and accentuated the importance of external regulatory bodies such as HERQA. Certain respondents also argued that HESO marked the shift in the focus of the Ministry of Education from concentrating on basic education to a recognition of the importance of higher education.

However, HERQA, as a quality assurance agency, was not established with the initiation of higher education institutions, and the role of higher education institutions was not visible during the process of determining the strategic and operational aspects of the agency. The data collected from the focus group discussions, interviews and documents highlight the underlying top-down orientation that is prevalent across quality assurance and other aspects of the higher education system.

Accentuating the top-down orientation, the interviews conducted with governmental stakeholders and selected researchers identified four major concerns for the Ministry of Education in the regulation of the quality of higher education institutions through HERQA. The first one was of addressing the growing quality challenges brought about by the rapid expansion of higher education and supporting the massification of higher education institutions using comparable developments with regard to quality. The rapid massification of higher education in Ethiopia has created acute challenges with regard to maintaining quality standards at higher education institutions (e.g. Akalu, 2014; Eshete, 2008; Geda, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Teshome & Kebede, 2009; World Bank, 2005; Yirdaw, 2016). The Ministry of Education considers the quality of higher education to be in a critical state. Nurturing quality is thus considered a key policy and strategic focus area of the government that is integral to raising the profile of Ethiopia's higher education to respectable national and global standards.

Second, HERQA was needed to fill the gap created due to the rapid increase in the number of higher education institutions and the capacity limitation of the Ministry of Education in terms of effectively regulating the quality of education provided at each institution. This represents a key issue, since higher education, unlike primary and secondary education, is the responsibility of the federal government.

Third, formal quality assurance was introduced to monitor the risks and threats posed by the proliferation of private higher education institutions. Despite quality being an issue that was at the centre of the reforms of the education sector, one of the key drivers for introducing quality assurance in Ethiopia was the understanding, by the government and Ministry of Education, of the need to regulate the standards of the rapidly proliferating private higher education institutions and safeguard the public from potential fraudulent providers and degree mills (Tamrat, 2012; Teshome & Kebede, 2009; Tesfaye, 2019). The interviews reiterated this intention of the Ministry of Education to 'regulate, inspect and control private institutions and the quality of education they provide' (GSM1, 05.10.2018). Similarly, a respondent who was serving in a high-ranking position at the Ministry of Education when HERQA was founded further confirmed that the agency was established in 'consideration of the rapid expansion of the private higher education sector' (GSM2, 10.10.2018). The need for periodically evaluating the private higher education sector constitutes a vital element of the transformations that sought to address the quality problem in Ethiopian higher education and demanded the establishment of formal quality assurance policies, structures, processes and procedures. Accordingly, HERQA has been required to police and deter higher education institutions from compromising the minimum quality requirements. This intention is reflected in both the higher education proclamations (351/2003 and 650/2009). The risks are not only associated with the sheer increase in the number of private institutions but include the gaps in fulfilling the requirements associated with the necessary infrastructure and facilities, quality academic and administrative staff, student admission, programme curricula, etc.

Fourth, the Ministry of Education needed to establish external quality regulation to ensure the accountability of higher education institutions to the objectives set by the proclamations for higher education, the responsible utilisation of public funding, the interests and wellbeing of stakeholders and the responsiveness of higher education institutions to national development needs. The Ministry of Education expects the agency to set the required standards, evaluate higher education institutions, ensure their accountability and provide support for quality improvement

at the institutions. These explanations account for the reluctance of the Ministry of Education and HERQA to entrust the responsibility of safeguarding the quality standards in education, research and community service entirely to higher education institutions.

Additionally, the advent of internal quality assurance is linked to the higher education proclamation (650/2009), which required higher education institutions to establish institutional quality enhancement mechanisms. Instead of relying on the willingness and commitment of institutions to safeguard the quality of education, the proclamation formally obliged them to set up reliable internal systems for quality enhancement. Such systems are required to address the professional development of the academic staff, quality of study programmes, course contents, teaching-learning processes, assessment and grading systems, student evaluation of course contents, methods of delivery and assessment (FDRE, 2009, Art. 22 [1-3]). The Ministry of Education and HERQA also demand higher education institutions to undertake periodic academic audits and follow ups, rectify the deficiencies found, maintain appropriate documentation of the results and submit it to HERQA and implement the recommendations given by the agency regarding quality enhancement measures (FDRE, 2009, Art. 22 [4-5]). In addition to this, as indicated earlier, HERQA requires the institutional quality audits undertaken by higher education institutions to address 10 focus areas that correspond to various aspects of institutional operations (HERQA, 2006b, 2007). Such external prescriptions reiterate a prevalent top-down orientation in quality assurance. Higher education institutions seem to have little room for bottom-up initiations and creativity in developing, shaping and implementing internal mechanisms for quality management that would fit and serve specific institutional needs and strategic aspirations.

The analysis of the data gathered from the case higher education institutions found a relatively weak bottom-up initiation with regard to the establishment and development of internal quality assurance practices. This is illustrated by three main findings. First, before establishing a systematic internal quality enhancement mechanism was made compulsory by the proclamation (650/2009), only Mekelle University and Admas University from the sample higher education institutions were found to have developed preliminary internal units for assessing the quality of teaching and learning and providing limited short-term trainings to improve the teaching methods, instructional skills and English language competence of their academic staff. These two case institutions demonstrated relatively better recognition of the value of utilising quality assurance practices to support the realisation of their mission, vision and strategic objectives. In contrast, Wollo

University, Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College all set up their relatively weak internal quality assurance units few years after the higher education proclamation (650/2009) came into effect. However, such expectations do not apply to Woldia University, since the university itself began operations a few years after the proclamation. In spite of this, the quality assurance manual of Woldia University views the engagement in quality assurance partly as a result of the university's realisation of the need to implement the policies, directives and regulations issued by the Ministry of Education and HERQA to assure the quality of education. It was also found that the responsibility for quality assurance at Woldia University is currently integrated with the coordination of research activities at the faculty level rather than being carried out independently.

Second, a common feature that, to a varying degree, is found across all the studied higher education institutions is the gap in extending internal quality assurance structures to all academic units at the grassroots level and ensuring that they remain functional. The data particularly indicated that the internal quality assurance units of Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College are run by a single officer and are, at best, barely functional. This, again, could be seen as a reflection of the weak bottom-up initiation at higher education institutions. Some of the case institutions, such as Mekelle University, Wollo University, Woldia University and Admas University, have gradually started, as early as 2013, to cascade the previously mainly centralised internal quality assurance structures to the faculty and college levels, in part, due to the recommendations from HERQA and by learning from local and global good practices. However, the data uncovered that the assignment of faculty- and college-level coordinators for quality assurance, in most cases, has achieved limited success with stimulating the engagement of the academic units with quality assurance than was expected. Third, there is little evidence to suggest that the studied higher education institutions have undertaken a systematic institutional self-assessment and audit on their own initiative without it being a requirement of the external quality audits carried out by HERQA.

In general, the empirical evidence gathered from HERQA, the studied institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers implied that quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education tends to be externally initiated, shaped and prescribed to higher education institutions. This is done with little input and participation by the institutions in the process and minimal intrinsic motivation from them to develop and utilise the internal mechanisms for quality regulation and enhancement. These findings resonate with the results of some previous studies, which reported that higher education institutions in Ethiopia

generally react to external quality reviews through a top-down approach rather than in a bottom-up manner (Girma, 2014; Tadesse et al., 2018). The findings, however, do not entirely dismiss the presence of a certain degree of internal interest for quality assurance in higher education institutions, which coincides with and contributes to adhering to the proclamations and other directives issued by HERQA and the Ministry of Education. As such, certain respondents claimed internal interest to have been the main driver behind the establishment of institutional quality assurance practices, but the researcher did not find sufficient documentary evidence to support such claims.

9.2.2 HERQA as a principal actor and owner of quality management processes

The analysis of the interviews and focus group discussions showed that the respondents repeatedly raised the concern that quality management processes tend to be initiated and directed by HERQA, whereas most higher education institutions have yet to develop an adequate and genuine sense of ownership. The respondents reiterated that HERQA is the main actor in the process of quality assurance rather than the higher education institutions and their academic communities. The existing quality assurance system is primarily and more visibly maintained by the external evaluations conducted by HERQA, more frequently through accreditation and reaccreditation, than the internal quality assessments. As shown by the data from the studied institutions, such external quality assurance processes are inadequately supported by internal procedures and processes at higher education institutions. This implies an imbalance between external and internal quality assurance, since the former tends to dominate the latter. This, however, conflicts with the globally accepted notion that quality assurance must primarily be the responsibility of higher education institutions and that external quality assurance agencies should monitor quality standards, conduct periodic evaluations and provide support and constructive feedback.

HERQA's self-evaluation of its functions claimed that it fulfils the requirements specified by the GGP endorsed by INQAAHE regarding how the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions is expected to be structured (HERQA, 2011a). The data gathered by the researcher and the findings of the previous studies, however, seem to challenge such characterisation. From a critical perspective, the trend of HERQA being the principal driver of quality

assurance in Ethiopian higher education seems to contradict the principles of the GGP that state that external quality assurance agencies need to recognise that the responsibility for quality assurance fundamentally lies with higher education institutions themselves and that quality assurance agencies must respect the ‘autonomy, identity and integrity’ of higher education institutions and their study programmes (INQAAHE, 2016, p. 8). Such criticisms are further backed by evidence from a previous study, which found that HERQA tends to ‘control the quality assurance processes’ in Ethiopia (Kahsay, 2012, p. 231; Tadesse, 2014). Other studies also found that it is HERQA that, in most cases, initiates the external quality reviews, while higher education institutions are largely limited to responding to this by conducting the necessary activities (Girma, 2014; Tadesse et al., 2018). Further, the respondents partly attributed HERQA’s domination over quality assurance processes to the fact that the initiation of quality assurance at both system and institutional levels was mainly the result of the national initiatives organised by the Ministry of Education and HERQA. The data from most of the studied institutions also showed that quality assurance has been, to a larger extent, a top-down imposition.

A number of previous studies showed that the landscape of the relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions tends to be hierarchical and lacks a level playing field that can nurture a conducive atmosphere of sufficient supervision, support and active communication (Abebe, 2014; Kassa, 2019; Salmi et al., 2017). The relationship has been further characterised as fragile (Geda, 2014). According to the findings from a comparison of codes of practices and guidelines for quality assurance applied in various parts of the world, the organisation of the relationship between external quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions must take into account the principles of institutional autonomy, accountability and improvement purposes, attitude of openness and communication and mutual respect (Aelterman, 2006).

Another key issue that, according to the data, can explain the passive role and poor sense of ownership of higher education institutions regarding quality assurance processes was the overall slow and unsatisfactory development of internal quality assurance practices, procedures and processes. This seems to suggest that the requirement for higher education institutions to develop institutional quality enhancement mechanisms by the higher education proclamation appears to have pushed institutions into creating internal quality assurance units of various titles, mandates and activities that, as shown by the evidence obtained from the studied institutions, tend to lack adequate support and ownership from the institutional

management and academic units. Some of the selected researchers argued that these obstacles have made internal quality assurance structures and processes weak, incomprehensive and inadequately functional.

The selected researchers reiterated that gaps in the commitment of institutional leadership deter the development of ownership towards internal quality assurance. The data from the studied institutions suggested that the support of the leadership and management can play a critical role in determining whether the staff of internal quality assurance units consider their work regarding quality as a full-time or part-time responsibility and whether there are separate internal structures for quality assurance or existing structures that integrate quality with other responsibilities. Similarly, a previous study on a public university concluded that support from the leadership can play a critical role in enhancing or hindering the institutionalisation process of quality assurance (Abebe, 2014). The empirical evidence suggested that the institutional management can shape the fate of the quality assurance mechanisms established at higher education institutions.

With the exception of the relatively encouraging progress observed at Admas University, the other studied higher education institutions were found to be far from institutionalising and owning quality management practices, procedures and processes that are aimed at safeguarding and improving quality standards in education. Quality assurance activities are not yet fully accepted and applied by the administrative and academic staff and students beyond a mere fulfilment of the formalities for establishing institutional quality enhancement mechanisms. The data showed that only a few institutions, such as Admas University, seem to be driven by a tangible motivation to raise the quality standards of education, other core activities and build institutional reputation. Similarly, the selected researchers criticised that the implementation of quality assurance at higher education institutions seems to be characterised by symbolic compliance and deficiencies in practical application¹⁴². As such, the activities that internal quality assurance offices, particularly at public higher education institutions such as Wollo University and Woldia University, carry out were found to be less directly connected to quality assurance. This is because these structures are gradually becoming occupied with responsibilities for coordinating institutional transformation initiatives and supervising the implementation of management and operational reform tools, such as Deliverology, Balanced Scorecard (BSC) and Kaizen. This indicated gaps in the implementation of the policy intentions regarding the institutional quality enhancement units that were put forth by the higher education proclamation (650/2009).

¹⁴² This resonates with the findings of a previous study conducted by Kahsay (2012).

Moreover, the weak institutionalisation of quality assurance further underlines the passive role of higher education institutions. It was found that, except Mekelle University and Admas University, the other studied public and private institutions waited until they received a reminder from HERQA to initiate the process of conducting a self-evaluation as a part of preparing for the periodic external institutional audit. Evidently, it has not become a part of the culture for higher education institutions to continuously assess and improve the quality of their operations. This could be explained by the fact that the existing quality assurance system lacks a solid and systematic foundation at higher education institutions.

On balance, certain respondents from both public and private sample institutions acknowledged the efforts that HERQA has, thus far, made to direct higher education institutions to assume the responsibility for safeguarding the quality of their operations and taking ownership of the quality management processes. The respondents from HERQA further maintained that the agency recognises the fact that transferring the principal responsibilities for quality assurance to the higher education institutions is crucial if lasting improvements in quality standards are to be achieved. The challenge, according to the interviews conducted with the selected researchers, is the gaps in the implementation of such principles, which arise from the rigid nature of the quality assurance mechanisms and capacity limitations of the agency and the lack of genuine commitment and scarcity of necessary human, financial and material resources at the institutions.

9.2.3 Ensuring compliance and accountability as a dominant orientation

The quality assurance system in Ethiopian higher education consists of external quality assurance implemented by HERQA and internal quality assurance applied at the higher education institutions. The external quality assurance is undertaken through accreditations and reaccreditations, surprise visits/inspections and audits carried out by HERQA since its establishment in 2003 by the higher education proclamation (351/2003). Many higher education institutions have established some form of internal units that are tasked with the responsibilities associated with internal quality assurance following the introduction of these requirements by the higher education proclamation (650/2009) and the recommendations of HERQA. The agency also discharges its responsibility for supervising the relevance of programmes and curricula at higher education institutions. The review of HERQA's functions by a panel of international experts similarly found that its audits and accreditation

evaluations address the issue of relevance despite lacking a comprehensive understanding and strategy (Henson et al., 2016)¹⁴³.

On one hand, the accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations, which are compulsory assessments implemented only for private higher education institutions, serve to verify whether institutions meet the specified minimum quality requirements for each programme they seek to open. HERQA applies accreditation in three cases: when a new private institution enters the higher education sector, when an accreditation granted to a previously accredited private institution expires and, thus, reaccreditation is needed and when an existing private institution starts a new programme. A surprise inspection to, mostly, private institutions is aimed at deterring violations of regulations and engagement in unethical activities. In addition to HERQA's evaluation, the Ministry of Education conducts an annual supervision of public institutions, and, likewise, the Ministry of Health supervises private institutions that provide education in health sciences.

On the other hand, audit is voluntary for public and private higher education institutions and constitutes the support and enhancement element of external quality assurance. Audits involve self-evaluations by institutions, document and on-site assessments by peer reviewers, provisions of recommendations for improvement to the institutions based on the findings of the audit, preparation of enhancement plans by the institutions and follow ups and support by HERQA. The structure and design of quality audits aim to stimulate quality enhancement at institutions, unlike the accountability and control-oriented accreditation evaluations conducted by the agency. Thus, accreditations and surprise inspections serve purposes related to accountability and control, whereas audits primarily target enhancement needs. Accordingly, HERQA has developed various national and institution-level guidelines and procedures, such as audit and accreditation guidelines and assessment standards and criteria (HERQA, 2006a).

A key pattern that emerged from the data analysis was that a majority of the respondents shared the view that the quality assurance system being implemented by HERQA in Ethiopian higher education is driven by the notion of quality as fitness for purpose and tends to focus on serving the purpose of ensuring the compliance, control and accountability of higher education institutions in relation to quality standards at the expense of fostering continuous quality enhancement at the institutional level. The underlying purpose and necessity of external quality evaluations are, in practice, linked to ensuring accountability. It was further reported

¹⁴³ The panel of experts further recommended that the mandate for assuring relevance should be transferred to the Ministry of Education.

that external quality evaluations are seen as key tools that can enable HERQA and the Ministry of Education to make judgements regarding the extent to which confidence can be established in the capacity and performance of institutions, make institutions accountable based on the evaluation results and take the necessary measures and sanctions following assessments. As the review of the institutional quality audit reports of the studied institutions suggested¹⁴⁴, the agency carries out institutional quality audits with the objective of validating the self-evaluation report submitted by higher education institutions. In the process, it judges the extent to which institutions align with the objectives of higher education set by the proclamation (650/2009) and determines its level of confidence in the ability of the institutions to provide relevant and appropriate higher education and safeguard the standard of their study programmes.

Another key pattern that emerged from the data analysis was the trend that accreditation dominates quality assurance processes in Ethiopian higher education. This was attributed to the rapid expansion of private institutions, shorter validity period of accreditation permits and a growing interest in strictly regulating the minimum quality standards in the private sector. The review of the documents indicated that accreditation is needed to ensure that the minimum quality standards of the educational inputs are fulfilled before the private higher education institutions are granted permission to deliver programmes. It is expected to establish a level of confidence regarding the institution's quality of education and standard of graduates. As the strategic document of HERQA shows, the agency seeks to assure stakeholders that accredited higher education institutions are of an appropriate standard and that the study programmes they offer meet the defined quality requirements and are relevant to the labour market and national development needs (HERQA, 2006a).

In practice, external and internal quality assurance tends to be used to ensure the effective regulation, control and accountability of higher education institutions. The analysis of the focus group discussions and documents showed that accreditation, in its current form, is employed to regulate the institutions that enter the private higher education market, the programmes they can provide, the premises from which they can run their operations, the recipients of their programmes and services, the number of students that can be enrolled, the conditions under which their programmes can be offered, the fulfilment of the necessary inputs and facilities that

¹⁴⁴ The institutional quality audit report of Woldia University was not available because, over the course of data collection (May 2016 to February 2019), the university was yet to undergo an external quality audit.

adequately meet the minimum quality requirements, the students that have graduated from their programmes and other key issues. A majority of the respondents from both the public and private sample institutions, HERQA, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers emphasised that accreditation is applied in Ethiopia largely to deter private higher education institutions from excessively focusing on profit-making at the expense of the quality of education, since most are thought to be owned by investors with little relevant experience and concern for academic values. Similarly, a former high-ranking official from the Ministry of Education further confirmed such approaches in the following way:

The education policy we have at the time allowed private institutions to provide higher education. As a result, the number of for-profit private institutions began to increase. As good as the expansion in the private sector, we needed the mechanism to ensure that these private institutions were established and running while meeting minimum quality standards and are periodically evaluated and assessed once they have become operational. (GSMG2, 10.10.2018)

The proliferation of private higher education institutions after the early 2000s increased the need for establishing mechanisms to regulate the private institutions that enter the higher education market and prevent significant harm from occurring to the quality and standards of education that could be caused by the lack of experience, discipline and academic culture in providing education, research and community service in the private sector. This suggests that the introduction of accreditation requirements in the private sector intended to serve the need to ensure that all the activities of private institutions adhere to the defined regulations and safeguard the interest and wellbeing of the public. Such approaches regulate the activities of private institutions by specifying the various aspects of their programmes, from admission and the qualifications of academic staff to the duration of courses and list of graduates. The respondents from the agency also recognised the capacity of accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations for promoting consistency in the quality standards of the programmes provided in institutions across the country.

The widespread deception, dishonest reporting and violations of regulations for quality hinder HERQA from readily trusting most private institutions and underlines the need for stringent programme-level accreditation and reaccreditation requirements and surprise inspections. The following excerpt from the focus group discussion conducted with the team of accreditation experts from HERQA shows the use of quality assurance as a mechanism to regulate and hold suspicious private institutions accountable:

Many private institutions have continuously violated regulations and accepted principles of responsible operation. This is why accreditation is needed to serve the purpose of controlling and regulating institutions and the higher education sector. Without such procedure, it won't be possible to safeguard and protect the interests of society. Accreditation needs to be strengthened further for such reasons. (HACC1, 04.10.2018)

If HERQA had succeeded in building trust with private institutions, a scenario wherein the agency could conduct institutional accreditation without having to accredit every programme could have been conceivable. Such scenarios would require private institutions to regain the agency's trust with regard to their commitment and capacity for putting in place robust mechanisms for evaluating and accrediting their own programmes without the need for external accreditation of each programme. However, such possibilities currently seem neither practical nor acceptable. Thus, HERQA needs to discharge its responsibility for safeguarding the value of the education provided and the credentials issued by higher education institutions and protect the public from fraudulent institutions.

Another way through which HERQA serves accountability requirements is by disseminating information to stakeholders regarding the quality standards of institutions and the programmes they offer (HERQA, 2006a) and by submitting reports of its operations to the Ministry of Education and parliament's standing committee for human resources development and technology. The respondents from the agency recognise the concerns of the government over the quality of higher education given the substantial amount of funding it provides to higher education institutions.

Moreover, HERQA is tasked with providing additional services, such as authenticating degree certificates and the credentials issued by local higher education institutions and determining the national equivalence of degrees obtained from institutions located abroad. These services are often used by graduates who wish to attest their degree certificates and employers who wish to verify the originality of the academic credentials submitted by candidates for vacancies. The agency began providing these services to address repeated complaints regarding the increasing forgery of academic credentials and prevent the issuance of substandard degrees by the rogue providers from flooding the labour market.

Some of the selected researchers indicated that, when HERQA was established under the leadership of international experts, the design of the quality management model comprised features of an accountability-oriented system, and the revised proclamation (650/2009) introduced elements of quality enhancement at the

institutional level¹⁴⁵. The analysis of the data collected from the focus group discussions, interviews and documents clearly suggested that the evaluative and accountability dimension of quality assurance has received considerable attention, while the enhancement dimension of quality assurance has been largely overlooked.

Deviating from such widespread trends, the focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA, particularly with the team of audit experts, criticised the notion widely held by higher education institutions and their administrative and academic staff, students and other stakeholders that HERQA is an agency that was established for controlling institutions. They also highlighted that the strategic focus of the agency is providing support to higher education institutions for developing systematic internal procedures for conducting quality assurance and periodically assessing whether these mechanisms are functional and adequate for assuring and enhancing the quality of their core activities. Such arguments are used to highlight the alleged widespread misunderstandings concerning the role of HERQA. However, the analysis of the activities that the agency often carries out evidently refutes these claims and further supports the trend of a quality assurance agency operating as a regulator.

Systemic issues underpinning the focus on accountability

The current quality assurance system seems rigid and bureaucratic in nature. The data analysis found that accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations are criticised for lacking depth, relying overly on assessing documents and focusing more on simply ticking boxes and checking whether certain inputs are fulfilled without actually assessing quality in a tangible way or thoroughly evaluating actual practices.

Another example of an underlying problem in the external quality assurance system that was identified by the respondents was the confusion and the lack of clear demarcation between accreditation and licensing. Certain respondents from HERQA and the selected researchers emphasised that what HERQA has been referring to as accreditation, in fact, is more akin to licensing. While accreditation, as a globally accepted practice, is conducted based on past performance, the evaluation regarded by HERQA as accreditation can more accurately be described as ‘pre-accreditation’ (Henson et al., 2016, p. 13) or licensing and registration. Such practices assess whether private higher education institutions have fulfilled the minimum

¹⁴⁵ The higher education proclamation (351/2003) is largely considered to have mainly introduced the notions of quality control.

quality standards and inputs required to attain permission to start operations and offer programmes. Interestingly, the respondents from HERQA admitted during the focus group discussions that the agency only recently became aware of the actual differences between accreditation and licensing, mainly after the exposure of its staff to international experiences through conferences and overseas experience-sharing visits.

HERQA has a desire to implement real accreditation, since the current form of accreditation, which is based on an assessment of inputs, cannot significantly guarantee or improve the quality of education. There is a desire for accreditation to be based on an assessment of the tangible work carried out by the internal quality assurance units of private higher education institutions rather than be based on the evaluation of inputs.

However, a conceptually and theoretically genuine accreditation is still yet to be implemented. The review of the documentary data did not indicate the presence of clear plans to separate accreditation and licensing such that the licensing process would be carried out first, followed by proper accreditation. If implemented, this could enable institutions to first undergo the necessary licensing evaluation required to receive permission for operating and getting accredited after a few years on the basis of the quality of their performance.

According to the data from the focus group discussions, the respondents from HERQA identified the lack of visible links between accreditation and audit as another major gap in the current quality assurance system. Accreditation and audit are compartmentalised and not linked. This problem seems to stem from the design of the quality assurance model implemented by HERQA. Internationally, audit usually leads to accreditation. According to the interviews conducted with the selected researchers, the absence of explicit links between audit and accreditation has created some challenges. One of these challenges is that accreditation has become preoccupied with evaluating educational inputs because most private higher education institutions are suspected of engaging in stage performances and deceptions to circumvent the minimum quality requirements necessary for obtaining accreditation permits. The other reported problem was that this design of external quality evaluations has increased the workload of HERQA. Linking audit and accreditation could increase the efficiency of HERQA with regard to utilising its human resources and the other evaluators and auditors it has trained, who have participated in evaluations over the years.

Additionally, the interviews conducted with the selected researchers highlighted that even the compliance and accountability aspects of quality assurance have not

been properly implemented, as the dichotomous approach employed by HERQA tends to focus only on private institutions due to the prevalent suspicion and weak trust towards them. This leaves public institutions, whom it trusts more, largely unchecked¹⁴⁶. The public sector of higher education is currently subjected to weak and disorganised accountability instruments for quality. The instruments, such as the accreditation requirements, that can ensure the accountability of public institutions are missing, since the government funds and supports public institutions but chooses to trust them and, thus, relax its regulation of them. The relationship HERQA has with public institutions mainly involves quality audits. However, the respondents from HERQA reported that certain public institutions, in isolated cases, have even failed to submit an enhancement plan when requested by the agency after having undergone an external quality audit evaluation. The respondents criticised that the agency seems to follow up on the enhancement works after audits and accreditations more for private institutions than for their public counterparts. The selected researchers argued that the absence of sanctions that have direct consequences for funding, institutional status and other aspects has made public institutions less concerned about and committed to taking the implementation of the recommendations from audits and quality assurance seriously. This is further complicated by the fact that, as indicated previously, the internal quality assurance units of most institutions demonstrate characteristics of having only a symbolic presence and are yet to become fully functional.

In general, there has been better accountability to expanding the access to higher education than to ensuring quality. Such measures seem to have prevented higher education institutions from giving adequate attention to quality and quality assurance. Certain respondents argued that, despite the compulsory accreditation requirements and surprise inspections, HERQA still has not enforced effective accountability instruments for private institutions. If this had not been the case, numerous substandard private institutions would not have proliferated.

¹⁴⁶ However, as discussed in Chapter Eight, section 8.6.4, the empirical evidence from the case higher education institutions suggested that HERQA's trust in public institutions could be more accurately characterised as being misplaced rather than being founded on the basis of an accurate assessment of the perceived concern, capacity, openness and risk of institutions.

Insights from case institutions: Focus on compliance in internal quality assurance

Although the proclamation (650/2009) promotes quality enhancement, in practice, the implementation of quality assurance at most of the studied higher education institutions tends to focus on compliance and accountability. There are gaps between policy intentions and practical applications. The data from the studied institutions also suggested some differences across higher education institutions in terms of their application of internal quality assurance. As discussed in Chapter Eight, the internal quality assurance units of most of the case institutions, with the notable exception of Admas University, were found to be, to a significant extent, inadequately functional. The quality enhancement activities of academic units and departments of the case institutions were reported to be underdeveloped.

The respondents from HERQA argued that there is a widespread misunderstanding regarding the purpose and application of the quality assurance procedures at higher education institutions, which contributes to an increasing tendency of quality assurance being employed as a tool for controlling and inspecting academic units. For example, the following excerpt taken from a focus group discussion illustrates such views:

Currently, we see a problem that many higher education institutions have difficulty distinguishing quality assurance from mere control and inspection procedures. In practice, they focus on producing numerous checklists that are almost all used to control and inspect completed operations. But they fail to understand that quality assurance is much more than such a simple approach. (HAUT1, 03.10.2018)

Providing a notable example of this tendency, the interviews and strategic documents regarding quality assurance indicated that the internal quality assurance officers of Admas University reported that, despite largely playing a relatively supportive role, they ‘act as fault-finder’ and external reviewers for all the units and offices of the university during internal audits (AF1, 05.10.2018). They proactively inspect, identify and address gaps in quality and standards as specified by HERQA and prepare the university for announced and unannounced external evaluations by HERQA. Another example can be the interviews from Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College, which seemed to suggest that respondents from these institutions consider focusing on inspecting the smooth flow of the teaching and learning processes to be the primary responsibility of the internal quality assurance units. Similarly, an important concern that Woldia University, as revealed by the review of its quality assurance manual, aims to address through its internal quality

assurance procedures is that of ensuring consistent approaches in assessing, auditing and monitoring the quality of programmes across departments.

Moreover, the empirical evidence from the sample higher education institutions suggested the existence of a trend of departments and academic units seeming to focus on those procedures of quality assurance that they consider to be simpler to undertake and to consume less time. These include the checklists that prompt short 'yes' and 'no' types of assessments, while ignoring and, at times, rejecting tasks that require detailed evaluations and explanations supported with evidence. At Mekelle University and Woldia University, for example, the respondents working in the internal quality assurance offices reported instances where some departments (e.g. technology fields) refused to carry out demanding tasks that involved detailed monitoring and auditing. The data also showed that some responsible departments, such as the department of Pharmacy at Wollo University, tend to be more receptive to quality assurance-related tasks and need less coaxing and reminding by faculty- and college-level quality assurance coordinators.

The review of the documents found that all the studied public and private higher education institutions included in this study tend to use numerous checklists as their main tool for assessing quality. Some of the checklists and formats that were found to be more widely used at most case institutions include checklists for the evaluation of the academic staff by students, colleagues and heads of academic units, course outlines, course offerings, curricula review and approval, course coverage and audits, attendance of academic staff, implementation of continuous assessment, supervision of practical learning, examination inspection, annual plans and periodic performance reviews, monitoring of the smooth functioning of teaching and learning activities and various discipline-specific checklists. At Wollo University, the departments and colleges use checklists for internal quality audits, programme level self-evaluation and service delivery and action plans for correcting identified gaps.

Additionally, the studied public institutions utilise checklists to monitor the implementation of the 'Day one, Class one' initiative, Education Development Army, one-to-five organisation, cooperative learning, Problem-Based Learning (PBL), Kaizen, Balanced Scorecard (BSC) and other operational and managerial reform tools. The data did not uncover explicit evidence of the implementation of such tools at Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical. Admas University, however, applies Kaizen and Balanced Scorecard (BSC). The study also found that Admas University, in contrast with the other studied institutions, has a better practice of undertaking quality assessments with an abundant number of standardised checklists. The use of programme accreditation follow up checklists has supported

the university with monitoring and evaluating its programmes. Another area where checklists are employed is in assessing the performance of the staff working at the various levels of internal quality assurance offices, for example, at Mekelle University, Wollo University, Woldia University and Admas University.

On balance, the data gathered from the case institutions suggested a trend where the institutions are increasingly recognising the need for rescuing quality, setting up internal structures for quality assurance, developing institutional policy guidelines to facilitate internal quality evaluations and documenting quality assurance activities. It has become increasingly common for higher education institutions to carry out various types of internal quality assessments and document quality assurance activities, but the composition of the accountability and enhancement orientations in the application of internal quality assurance varies markedly across institutions.

Motives for focusing on accountability and compliance

A closer analysis of the data revealed that the growing demand for more control and inspection seems to be underpinned by various issues. First, the rapid increase in the number of for-profit private institutions was seen a key factor that indicated the need for ensuring effective regulation and accreditation to safeguard quality. Certain respondents further indicated that the lack of well-developed experience with implementing quality assurance at the system and institutional levels seems to reflect a preference of the current quality assurance system to rely on strict control and hold, particularly, private institutions accountable to internal and external stakeholders. Second, the respondents underlined that such tendencies could reflect the weak trust in private institutions, who are ‘often seen as thieves whom the police have to keep an eye on at all times’ (HAUT2, 03.10.2018), and the unsuitability of relying on quality assurance that is founded on the principle of trust. Third, HERQA has been forced to focus on ensuring accountability and control for higher education institutions. The inadequate understanding about the nature of quality and quality assurance in higher education was considered, by the respondents, to be one of the reasons behind the external pressure on HERQA to simply focus on accreditation. As a result, the focus of the Ministry of Education and government are readily directed towards ensuring the strict regulation of institutions and safeguarding the interests of the public through HERQA. Fourth, government has a duty and interest to ensure the accountability of higher education institutions to the national

development needs and protect the interest of the public¹⁴⁷. Fifth, as highlighted in Chapter Six, another trend observed in Ethiopia is the increasing politicisation of higher education and the quality of education, where the government seeks to demonstrate its effective regulation and avoid criticisms and the loss of confidence in the higher education system. The issue of quality has been an important topic of policy debates during national elections. Sixth, the lack of a well-developed quality culture highlights the perceived necessity of focusing on accountability, control and external dictation rather than relying on the intrinsic commitment and internal mechanisms of quality assurance at higher education institutions.

Despite the Ministry of Education having repeatedly expressed its dedication to safeguarding and improving quality standards, the data from the focus group discussions, interviews and media reports suggested that, in practice, the government seems more interested in the activities related to accreditation and in ensuring that private institutions are strictly regulated and controlled. In the excerpt presented below, a respondent from HERQA described the complex nature of such tendencies:

The government and Ministry are sandwiched between two interests, which are the demand for expanding access to higher education and desire to ensure quality. Failure to realise the objectives set for assuring the quality of higher education seems to have pushed the government to engage in a kind of firefighting by focusing on control and monitoring of higher education institutions. And this push towards accreditation, sudden and unannounced visits and monitoring has affected the operations of HERQA. (HAUT3, 03.10.2018)

The respondents from HERQA acknowledged that the external pressure in favour of more accountability and control tends to overpower and weaken the agency's commitment towards quality audits. They further argued that there is a need for raising awareness at the national level regarding the fact that control and regulation have limited capacity in terms of stimulating sustainable improvements in quality.

Interestingly, a key finding that emerged from the data analysis was the significant contradictions between the interests and aspirations that HERQA, on one hand, and the Ministry of Education and government, on the other hand, seem to have regarding where the focus of HERQA's external quality evaluations should be directed. In contrast to the pressure from the government and Ministry of Education, the respondents from HERQA reiterated the strategic aspirations of the

¹⁴⁷ The discussion presented in Chapter Four showed that higher education institutions could be subjected to academic, managerial and financial, legal, political and professional accountability instruments.

agency to focus more on quality enhancement and providing support to higher education institutions rather than inspection and control activities. HERQA's audit and accreditation experts expressed their views in favour of focusing more on building a quality culture and instilling quality assurance procedures that are based on trust and reducing the over-reliance on accreditation and surprise inspections of private higher education institutions. This suggested a preference and an understanding that it could be more useful to focus on making institutions responsible for and the owners of their quality assurance processes. This desire could be attributed to the fact that HERQA has greater expertise and understanding of the science of quality assurance in higher education and the trends in global practices than other government bodies, such as the Ministry of Education. Thus, the agency seems to acknowledge the value of placing more emphasis on stimulating quality enhancement to enable lasting improvements in quality standards.

Explanations for the exclusive focus on accreditation of private institutions

The data analysis uncovered a growing pressure on HERQA to strengthen its control and inspection through accreditation (only applicable to private institutions) rather than by conducting quality audits (applicable to both public and private institutions). However, 86 per cent of the enrolment in higher education is accommodated by public higher education institutions, while private institutions account for only about 14 per cent. Although quality problems are seen at both public and private institutions, the existing quality assurance model implemented by HERQA tends to control private institutions through strict programme-level accreditation, whereas public universities are entitled to open new programmes without any external accreditation. As such tendencies seem to have peaked in 2017, HERQA made a major change to its operations when it discontinued all ongoing and planned quality audits and began to focus its resources entirely on carrying out accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations at private higher education institutions. In practice, this measure has also led to public higher education institutions not being subjected to a any external quality evaluation by HERQA. This can also be seen as an extension of the dichotomous approach of HERQA to public and private institutions.

The analysis of the data gathered from the focus group discussions and interviews identified some explanations that, according to the respondents, account for this exclusive focus on the accreditation of private higher education institutions and for

leaving their public counterparts unregulated. The discussion below delves into six key explanations.

Capacity limitation of HERQA. First, the respondents highlighted that HERQA's acute capacity limitation has reached a stage where the agency can no longer continue to simultaneously carry out quality audits for both public and private institutions and process an ever-increasing number of time-sensitive applications for accreditation and reaccreditation permits from private institutions. As a result, at the time of data collection (October 2018), it had been more than a year since HERQA has transferred all its quality audit experts to work on accreditation evaluations. This has resulted in institutional and programme audit evaluations being discontinued entirely and those that were in process being left incomplete¹⁴⁸. The respondents indicated that HERQA's plan for the 2018/19 academic year reflected such measures. The agency has also markedly reduced its activities related to the provision of training to higher education institutions on the subject of quality and quality assurance. HERQA has recently struggled to continue conducting surprise inspections after having received several leads that certain institutions may be engaged in suspicious and unlawful activities.

This deficiency in the agency's capacity can be linked to at least five main issues. First, the workload of HERQA's experts has been sharply increasing as the number of public and private higher educations and their study programmes continue to rapidly grow. As such, the processing of applications for accreditation and reaccreditation permits account for a substantial share of the workload of the experts from HERQA. Second, the absence of links between accreditation and audit evaluations escalates the workload of HERQA's experts. Third, the shortage of experts is exacerbated by the high turnover and overall low attractiveness of positions in HERQA due to the inadequate salary and benefit package. This has been challenging for the agency, particularly, given the relatively higher education and experience it requires for its positions. Fourth, the lack of adequate and systematic capacity-building mechanisms at HERQA further account for the current capacity problems. Fifth, HERQA being the sole agency with the authority to safeguard the quality and relevance of higher education and the absence of other private accreditation agencies and professional associations that actively engage in quality assurance prevents the outsourcing and sharing of its responsibilities and workload.

¹⁴⁸ Prior to this, the agency had already assigned half of its audit experts to work on its accreditation services.

During the interviews, two respondents, who represent private higher education institutions in HERQA's governing board¹⁴⁹, revealed that they had objected when the agenda to discontinue audits and entirely focus on accreditation was discussed. Such a measure was considered to violate the mandates that the higher education proclamation has entrusted to HERQA, since the government is funding and supporting the agency to carry out periodic quality audits and accreditations for higher education institutions. It was also reported that complaints were submitted by board members to the director of the agency.

The discontinuation of the audits has considerably slowed the engagement with quality assurance in public higher education institutions. For example, the interviews from Mekelle University reported that the university had submitted its institutional self-evaluation report and had been waiting for over a year to undergo an external evaluation by HERQA¹⁵⁰. The data suggested that, without the adequate capacity-building efforts, HERQA will likely struggle to fully accommodate the applications for accreditation and reaccreditation alone. The pressing capacity limitations seem to have triggered a trend, which is becoming increasingly common, of accreditation continuing to be the primary focus of HERQA's external quality evaluations, while audits become secondary, if not gradually forgotten. In general, the current capacity limitations, both in terms of the number and quality of its experts, imply that the agency has failed to fulfil expectations.

The respondents from the governmental stakeholders stated that HERQA was originally established because the Ministry of Education, being a bureaucratic government organisation, did not have the capacity and expertise needed to regulate the quality of the growing number of public and private higher education institutions operating in the country. The Ministry relied on the technical assistance of foreign experts to set up, organise and lead HERQA during the initial years following its establishment. This was due to the scarcity of prior native experience with establishing and administering quality assurance agencies. Further, the decision to opt for a quasi-autonomous type of agency was partially based on the lessons learned from international experience.

Dissimilar degrees of trustworthiness attributed to public and private institutions. The second explanation behind the exclusive focus on accrediting private institutions and

¹⁴⁹ One of these respondents also serves in the leadership of the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association, and the other respondent was identified as a relevant researcher in the quality assurance of Ethiopian higher education. Additionally, both respondents hold leadership positions in private higher education institutions.

¹⁵⁰ Admas University was found in a similar situation.

discontinuing external audits for public institutions is associated with the contrasting levels of trustworthiness attributed to public and private higher education institutions by HERQA and the Ministry of Education. As discussed in Chapter Eight, HERQA generally has strong trust in, optimistic expectations of and a positive attitude towards public higher education institutions, whereas it tends to perceive most private institutions with suspicion, weak trust and pessimistic expectations. The agency negatively assesses concern, capacity, openness and risk for private institutions in relation to quality and quality assurance, while its assessment of public institutions is primarily positive. HERQA and the Ministry of Education tend to have a biased perspective with regard to the profit-generation objective of private institutions, considering it a major source of the problem related to the quality of higher education. The scale of the quality problems presented at private institutions is considered to be considerably higher than that of their public counterparts¹⁵¹. Public institutions are seen to pose fewer quality problems, since they mostly adhere to regulations and mostly operate within the broader governance and accountability framework of the Ministry of Education. Such contrasting outlooks account for why HERQA, when faced with acute capacity limitations, decided to concentrate its entire efforts on scrutinising private institutions while leaving the quality of public institutions largely without external evaluation and regulation.

Priority given to accreditation over quality audit. The third explanation suggested that the decision to focus entirely on accreditation evaluations, which are more time-sensitive, and discontinue audit was driven by the need to address complaints over delayed accreditation evaluations. The continuous and rapid increase in the number of private institutions and their study programmes that need accreditation permits has created issues for the agency. HERQA's leaders fear that a sizeable backlog of unanswered applications for accreditation and reaccreditation permits would trigger complaints regarding the lack of good governance by HERQA and the Ministry of Education. This is because such delays more directly restrict the operations of private institutions and result in unnecessary costs and losses in revenue for them and their owners, who are viewed as investors by the government. In contrast, a similar sense of urgency and direct impact on the survival of the institutions does not exist for audits. Quality audit was largely not considered a priority by HERQA, as it is

¹⁵¹ In addition to their contrasting outlook, the respondents from the Ministry of Education acknowledged the need for conducting studies that assess the quality of the academic outputs of public and private institutions in order to identify the magnitude of the quality concerns for the two sectors using an evidence-based approach.

undertaken less frequently and has no direct operational implications for higher education institutions. Further, audits are dependent on the voluntary initiation of institutions, whereas accreditation requirements are compulsory. Fewer sensitive ramifications are associated with the failure to respond in a timely manner to requests for external audits submitted by public higher education institutions. As a result, HERQA has decided to suspend all audit evaluations and concentrate its efforts on accreditation evaluations. However, the respondents from non-governmental stakeholders stated that the agency is currently struggling to satisfy the requests from private institutions for accreditation and reaccreditation permits even after discontinuing quality audits.

Political pressure from the Ministry and government on HERQA. The analysis of data uncovered that the politicisation of quality assurance in higher education and the pressure from the government and the Ministry of Education has resulted in the operations of HERQA being focused entirely on regulating, inspecting and accrediting private institutions. This has left the quality of public institutions unscrutinised, despite the fact that they account for the majority of the total enrolment into higher education. The focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA emphasised the growing pressure exerted by the Ministry of Education and the government on HERQA to increase its inspection and regulation of private higher education institutions. The agency is required to increasingly strengthen its policing and follow up for private institutions, which, in practice, seems to progressively push it towards undertaking accreditations and gradually giving less priority to quality audits. The aforementioned political pressure on HERQA has hindered the agency's ability to discharge its responsibilities regarding audits and accreditations. This pressure was attributed, by the respondents, to the lack of a deeper understanding about quality and quality assurance among policy-makers and officials at the Ministry of Education. These external stakeholders seem to assume that public institutions do not need rigorous external regulation for quality, since they are considered to be automatically accredited upon their establishment by the decree of the Council of Ministers.

Moreover, during the focus group discussions, the respondents from HERQA raised a sensitive associated issue. They stated that, in some cases, the politicisation of higher education has forced the Ministry of Education to interfere with the operational matters of HERQA. For example, the respondents described cases where the Ministry of Education has put pressure on the agency to not take certain serious measures. These include closing programmes and cancelling the validity of credentials that were unlawfully issued to graduates by private institutions that were

caught having enrolled and graduated students without having proper accreditation permits. This was said to be done because there is a widespread fear that such measures could lead to a political and social crisis and trigger criticisms against the government. It was reported that the Ministry of Education has thus 'pressured HERQA to find a way to grant accreditation' to such institutions and 'legitimise the qualifications issued' (HAUT5, 03.10.2018).

Further, private investment in the education sector is often given more significance and priority by the government and political establishment. Accordingly, the contribution of private institutions is considered vital for expanding the access to higher education where public institutions have limited reach and for accommodating the fast-growing youth population of the country. The agency has, thus, prioritised accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations over audits in an effort to 'avoid upsetting private investors in higher education' (RAS5, 04.12.2018).

Ministry's conflict of interest and HERQA's lack of autonomy. The fifth explanation for the increased focus on accreditations for private institutions and the suspension of audits for public institutions relates to HERQA's compromised autonomy and the Ministry of Education's conflict of interest when evaluating public institutions¹⁵². The respondents from HERQA argued that the lack of managerial and operational autonomy prevented the agency from carrying out extensive evaluations for public institutions. The interviews with the selected researchers revealed that the government tends to see public institutions as its own but projects a lack of a sense of ownership towards private institutions. This attitude of 'othering private institutions' underpins the current imbalance in external quality assurance (RMN2, 10.10.2018). It partially explains why private institutions have become the only targets for HERQA's external quality evaluations when the agency encountered severe capacity limitations. Several respondents accused that the Ministry of Education tends to protect public institutions from rigorous quality evaluations, with regard to, for instance, requirements for accreditation and reaccreditation. The legal and governance framework within which public institutions operate shields them from HERQA's accreditation and sanctions. Such claims regarding the conflicts of interest are further highlighted by the fact that both public institutions and HERQA rely on the government for funding and other resources and that their governance structures are closely tied to the Ministry of Education (Henson et al., 2016). It has been a common practice, for many years, for the Ministry of Education to appoint the senior leaders of the public institutions and HERQA. The higher education

¹⁵² This issue has been briefly discussed in Chapter Eight, section 8.5.2 as one of the major barriers for higher education institutions to trust HERQA.

proclamation stipulates that HERQA is accountable to the Ministry of Education, which was considered a limitation by the respondents from the agency, the studied public and private higher education institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and the selected researchers. They argued that, as long as HERQA remains directly accountable to the Ministry of Education, it will continue to be challenging for the agency to accredit the programmes delivered at public institutions¹⁵³.

Capturing the complex challenges surrounding this dichotomous approach employed in external quality assurance from the perspective of HERQA, an accreditation expert commented, ‘The proclamation does not prohibit us from accrediting public institutions, but we don’t have enough capacity and a suitable structure for the task even if we were allowed to do so’ (HAUT1, 03.10.2018). Such statements, when analysed, imply three key issues. First, it is an admission by the respondents from HERQA that the proclamation does not prescribe the requirement of accreditation only for private higher education institutions and that public institutions may also be subjected to such requirements. This validates the fact that the current dichotomous approach has no legal basis. Second, it seems that the experts from HERQA may believe that the agency needs permission from the Ministry of Education to introduce accreditation in public institutions rather than being able to enforce the non-divisive provisions of the proclamation as an autonomous entity. The selected researchers and experts also underlined that HERQA ‘lacks the courage’ to confront public universities and enforce strict accreditation requirements (RWT1, 10.10.2018). Interestingly, the respondents from the Ministry of Education are aware of the existence of such mindset in the agency, and they considered it a ‘kind of self-censorship’ (GSMG2, 10.10.2018). Third, the capacity limitation is cited to be an additional obstacle to extending the accreditation and reaccreditation requirements to public institutions.

The data from the interviews conducted with the respondents from the Ministry of Education indicated that HERQA needed to be established to avoid the perceived conflicts of interest that could arise from the Ministry assessing the performance of the higher education institutions that it establishes, funds and manages. The assessment of the status quo, however, showed increasing interference with the management and operations of HERQA by the Ministry. This suggests a departure

¹⁵³ The focus group discussions with HERQA’s experts indicated that the agency had submitted a proposal to have itself be governed by the parliament (House of People’s Representatives) and to revise its salary scale, positions and internal structure and organisation. The Ministry of Education has not thus far (more than a year since submission) officially responded to the proposal. This may imply a lack of the political will to approve the proposed restructuring.

from the rationale behind the founding of the agency, which was to prevent conflicts of interest by establishing a semi-autonomous quality assurance agency that is governed by a board and can exercise autonomy.

The respondents from HERQA expressed that the Ministry of Education may not allow the programmes at public institutions to be accredited in the near future. It was argued that the Ministry recognises that subjecting public institutions to accreditation could likely result in the closure of several programmes and institutions. This could damage the credibility of the education system and create political tension between the government and ethnic groups in the regions where the institutions are located¹⁵⁴. This conflict of interest and lack of autonomy, compounded by severe capacity limitations, are argued to have led the authority and resources of HERQA to be focused entirely on accrediting private institutions.

Reliance on the Ministry's annual supervision of public institutions. The sixth justification found from the data analysis was that the Ministry of Education seems to assume that its annual performance supervision sufficiently monitors public institutions. Interestingly, the Ministry acknowledges that it has an insufficient number of experts to extend its annual inspection to private institutions and, hence, puts more pressure on HERQA to focus on the external quality regulation of private institutions. In contrast, the respondents from the Ministry held the view that it has an adequate inspection team for assessing the performance of public universities¹⁵⁵. As a result, the Ministry seems to view HERQA's complete emphasis on private institutions as less problematic. This may have been due to the fact that public institutions, despite the suspension of audits, have continued to be assessed through the annual performance supervisions carried out by the Ministry of Education. The data analysis suggested that the Ministry largely believes that it currently gives public institutions adequate regulative attention.

The supervision is used to evaluate the overall performance of higher education institutions with regard to the implementation of their strategic plans. The insights gained from a review of the checklists used during the supervision, the sample supervision reports and the analysis of the interviews conducted with the respondents from the Ministry of Education found that the annual supervision covers a variety of aspects. The first part of the supervision assesses the key activities

¹⁵⁴ This is linked to the fact that the construction of new public universities at several locations across the regions of Ethiopia was significantly based on a consideration of ethnic politics.

¹⁵⁵ The Ministry has more experts for supervising and following up on the performance of public institutions, while it had only one expert for the private sector at the time of data collection in October 2018.

of the public institutions. These include the organisation and functioning of their Education and Technology Development Army (EDA), their performance regarding the implementation of developmental good governance initiatives and their implementation of institutional reform tools such as Balanced Score Card (BSC), Kaizen, Deliverology, Job Evaluation and Grading (JEG), Education Development Army (EDA) and Cooperative Learning. The second section of the supervision focuses on assessing the core activities associated with, for instance, assurance of relevance and quality, engagement in research and community service, university-industry linkage and resource and asset utilisation and management. Finally, the team of supervisors from the Ministry evaluate other multifaceted activities, such as the efforts made to reduce the gaps between the participation of and benefits for men and women and to support students with special needs and those from underdeveloped regions. In addition, activities related to environmental protection and fighting against HIV and addiction are also examined.

The analysis of the aforementioned focus areas of the supervision suggested that the annual performance supervision tends to be comprehensive in nature, yet it does not sufficiently assess relevance and quality issues such that it can serve as a comparable replacement of the more thorough external quality audit conducted by HERQA. Assessing the relevance and quality of the activities of institutions constitutes only a small component of the comprehensive annual performance supervision carried out by the Ministry of Education for public institutions when compared to the quality audit evaluations that used to be undertaken by HERQA. However, the respondents from the Ministry tend to consider the annual supervision to be more comprehensive and effective than the quality evaluations that HERQA used to undertake, especially for public higher education institutions.

Further, the interviews with the respondents from the Ministry indicated that, during these annual supervisions, the team of supervisors, as in the quality audits conducted by HERQA, hold separate face-to-face discussions with various groups of internal stakeholders. These groups include the senior and middle management, the administrative and support staff, academic staff and students. The supervision also involves site visits to, for example, libraries, laboratories, classrooms, ICT centres, research directorates, student dormitories and dining halls, student clinics, refreshment facilities, student service offices, community service offices, university-industry linkage offices, institutional transformation offices, human resources management offices and other facilities. At the conclusion of the supervision, the teams of supervisors prepare a report and offer recommendations for improvement

accordingly, but the outcome of the supervision is not connected to sanctions, which makes it less impactful.

As such, the purpose, focus, method and implications of the supervision conducted by the Ministry seem to resemble and, to some extent, overlap with the assessment that HERQA used to conduct for quality assurance purposes. This also raised the issue of the unclear demarcation between the responsibilities of the Ministry and HERQA.

In conclusion, the combined effects of the explanations discussed above seem to have resulted in the ongoing trend of HERQA's external quality evaluations being primarily focused on private institutions, while no visible external assessment of quality is currently being enforced for public institutions. The negative attitude towards the profit-generation motive of private institutions further aggravates this tendency. Moreover, HERQA's highly infrequent engagement with public institutions and its decision to suspend audits in 2017—the only type of external quality evaluation applicable to the public sector—may have gradually weakened the attention that public institutions give to quality and quality assurance. It has also diminished HERQA's visibility among public institutions. One of the respondents summarised such tendencies in the following excerpt:

HERQA doesn't have much engagement with public institutions. In some cases, even to our surprise, some public universities didn't know who HERQA is. Many thought that we were some kind of a charity organisation working on the issues related to education. (HACC2, 04.10.2018)

9.2.4 Focus on assessing educational inputs and processes

The data analysis found that the external and internal quality evaluations conducted by HERQA currently focus on inspecting learning inputs and processes but accord inadequate attention to assessing the outputs of higher education institutions. With regard to the external quality evaluations carried out by HERQA, the analysis of the interviews and documents identified that accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations rely on assessing an institution's educational inputs, resources and facilities and a long list of compulsory documents. In contrast, the quality audits administered for both public and private higher education institutions tend to focus on assessing the teaching and learning processes. The evidence obtained from the studied institutions also suggested that internal quality assurance efforts largely focus on assessing and monitoring essential programme inputs, institutional facilities and the delivery of courses. Additionally, the review of previous studies further

highlighted the trend of emphasising the assessment of the educational inputs and teaching-learning processes, leading to the educational outputs largely being ignored (Abebe, 2015b). The focus on assessing documents, rather than institutional activities, progress and student learning, was found to be another key issue.

The emphasis on assessing the inputs and facilities of higher education institutions was found to be most evident in accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations. The review of the relevant documents showed that the list of documents that a new private institution requires to apply for accreditation for a specific programme include the following:

- Application letter
- Business and commercial registration license from the Commercial Registration and Business Licensing Directorate of the Ministry of Trade and Industry
- Evidence of financial viability
- Memorandum of agreement for programmes in health, agriculture and cross-border delivery (for example, a memorandum of agreement signed with a hospital where students can attend future practical lessons if the institution intends to start a programme in nursing)
- Institutional legislation, academic legislation
- Strategic plan for operations that spans five years and an annual plan based on the strategic plan
- Needs assessment for programmes
- Curriculum for each programme that has been adapted from the nationally harmonised curriculum (including the length of programmes and number of credit hours, such as three years [108-111 credit hours], four years [144-147 credit hours], five years [180-183 credit hours], and modules and manuals for tutors for programmes to be delivered through distance basis)
- Human resources policy
- Student handbook, student assessment and evaluation policy, student support and counselling guidelines
- Quality assurance policy, research and community service policy
- Building lease or rental agreement for a building or premises that is valid for at least the subsequent three years¹⁵⁶ or evidence of ownership of a building or premises¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Institutions are not required to pay rent in advance.

¹⁵⁷ Institutions need to inform HERQA beforehand if they plan to relocate from one premises to another.

- The profiles of academic, technical and administrative staff members and the information on the modules need to be submitted at least 10 days ahead of a scheduled accreditation visit

The commercial registration verifies the financial capital and ownership of the institution (whether it is a private limited or shared company), company name and grants the institution legal personality as well.

In addition to the aforementioned documents, the accreditation experts conduct extensive on-site assessments of programme facilities, such as classrooms, libraries, computer centres, programme laboratories and workshops, and offices.

Additionally, private institutions that wish to apply for the reaccreditation of an existing programme are required to fulfil the following documents: application letter, renewed business license, evidence of financial viability, revised strategic and annual plan, progress report (of activities undertaken by the institution since its establishment), self-evaluation document, revised curriculum, revised building lease and profiles of academic and technical staff. If the criteria for accreditation and reaccreditation are not met, institutions are given an opportunity to improve their application and reapply after three months. If they do not succeed in fulfilling the criteria again a final reapplication is allowed after a year. Finally, failing to pass the evaluation after a year results in the closure of the programme in question.

Despite the lower number of documents required for reaccreditation compared to accreditation, the depth of the evaluation is reported to be incremental. This is because institutions are required to demonstrate evidence of their activities in association with the plans they had submitted at the time of accreditation. It was found that about 24 documents are required for the accreditation of a new programme for a new institution, whereas 10-12 documents are required for the reaccreditation of an existing programme. This suggested that accreditation tends to focus on documents, while reaccreditation involves evaluating practices and activities.

As can be deduced from the above paragraphs, accreditation and reaccreditation procedures focus on ensuring that private higher education institutions have achieved the required minimum standards in terms of having the sufficient resources that are essential for starting operations. These include funds, teachers, classrooms, libraries and laboratory facilities, curricula, admission procedures, offices, administrative and support staff and other material resources (HERQA, 2007). The focus is on verifying that the physical facilities are in line with the requirements for accreditation, that the staffing and staff-student ratio are at the correct levels, that

structured admission policies and student support services exists, that programme approval and review mechanisms are present and that student-centred teaching methods and structured assessment policy are applied (HERQA, 2007). Moreover, HERQA and the Ministry of Education, as highlighted in Chapter Eight, tend to distinguish between the perceived quality of public and private institutions. This is partially based on overall institutional capacity and an assessment of the inputs and facilities associated with the teaching-learning processes. The entities tend to favour public institutions while holding a largely negative outlook towards most private institutions.

Currently, the efforts aimed at monitoring the quality of education outputs are rudimentary. In fact, assessing student attrition and graduation levels seems to have been used as the main method by which higher education institutions in Ethiopia appraise their educational outputs (HERQA, 2006b). Such measurements, however, have poor scope and limited capacity for evaluating transformation regarding the knowledge, skills and cognitive development of graduates. As such, a previous study identified the disproportionate emphasis placed on assessing inputs, quality assurance processes and levels of institutional performance as a key methodological flaw that has manifested in the quality assurance system implemented at the national and institutional levels (Tadesse, 2014, p. 150). Moreover, the emphasis on inputs, according to the teams of accreditation and audit experts from HERQA, seems to trigger a feeling of ‘resistance and resentment towards the agency’ and increasingly pushes institutions to engage in deceptive presentations and dishonest reporting to secure accreditation permits (HACC2, 04.10.2018). These imbalances create obstacles for the development of a comprehensive approach to quality in higher education.

However, an encouraging recent development has been the introduction of compulsory exit exams for students who graduate from all undergraduate programmes starting from the 2018/19 academic year. This system was implemented after being piloted in the fields of medicine and law for a few years (Ministry of Education, 2017; Salmi et al., 2017). The exit exam is expected to certify that the graduates have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills needed to work in the relevant fields and to ensure that they meet the minimum graduate profile of their respective programmes. The Ministry expects that the application of the exit exams could assist in restoring the trust of employers, industries and the general public in the quality of graduates. In spite of this, the exit exam has been met with stiff resistance from students and, in some instances (for example, at Bahir Dar University), has led to students boycotting classes and protests and violence

occurring in campus premises (“Exit Exam to be Administered to Students,” 2018). Certain public universities are in the process of experimenting with conducting graduate tracer and employability surveys¹⁵⁸, but such practices are still largely underdeveloped. As such, less attention is given to engaging graduates and employers during quality evaluations at most of the institutions included in this study. Even worse, Wollo University has not established links with employers to help ensure that its graduates are well prepared for professional life. The university has not undertaken a graduate tracer study or established formal contacts with its graduates.

The internal quality assurance units of most institutions tend to focus on assessing educational inputs and processes while largely overlooking the quality of educational outputs. These units of the studied private institutions, namely Admas University and Sheba University College, tend to place an emphasis on checking the quality of educational inputs and following up on the applications for and statuses of programme accreditations. In contrast, the data gathered from Medco Bio-Medical College showed little evidence of visible engagement in assessing the standards of inputs and monitoring whether study programmes are being delivered properly using the mechanisms of internal quality assurance. In contrast, the data collected from the studied public institutions, namely Mekelle University, Wollo University and Woldia University, suggested that their internal quality assurance units seem to be mainly occupied with the assessment of the teaching and learning processes. Further, they are only partially engaged with the implementation of institutional transformation tools rather than evaluation of inputs and outputs of academic activities. There can be two main explanations for this. The first could be the fact that the only type of external quality evaluation public institutions were subjected to is HERQA’s quality audit, which, by its nature, places more emphasis on an institution’s academic and administrative processes. The other explanation can be the exemption of public institutions from accreditation and reaccreditation requirements, which reduces the effort needed to carefully monitor educational inputs and facilities. Despite these patterns, the findings also acknowledged the limited efforts made by the staff working at the internal quality assurance units of all the studied public institutions to assess the adequacy of their library, laboratory and other practical learning facilities.

Another imbalanced tendency observed in the current quality assurance system is the emphasis on assessing the quality of the teaching and learning functions of higher education institutions while leaving the missions for conducting research and

¹⁵⁸ Admas University has also conducted tracer studies.

community engagement largely unaddressed (Abebe, 2015b). This could be explained from three perspectives. First, the higher education proclamation (650/2009) provides detailed provisions, in Article 41, regarding monitoring and improving the quality of teaching-learning and the assessment of students. However, similar directives are missing for the research and community service functions (FDRE, 2009)¹⁵⁹. Additionally, provisions have been stipulated for internal systems of quality enhancement at every higher education institution to provide clear and comprehensive measures for quality. These cover the professional development of the academic staff, course contents, teaching-learning processes, student evaluations, assessments and grading systems, which should also include the students evaluating course contents together with the methods and systems of delivery, assessment, examinations and grading (FDRE, 2009, Art. 22 [2]). Such national level directives are found to be consistent with the main activities of the internal quality assurance units of higher education institutions. For example, the data showed that the internal quality assurance units of the studied public and private higher education institutions, except Medco Bio-Medical College, focus on, albeit to a varying degree, carrying out course audits, monitoring the distribution of courses, conducting teacher evaluations, carrying out the continuous assessment of students, reviewing and approving curricula, following up on whether courses are started on the first day of the academic calendar (which is aimed at improving time management of course delivery) and performing other routine tasks related to checking whether the teaching and learning processes are proceeding smoothly. This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g. Abebe, 2014, 2015). These internal units also fulfil the responsibility of preparing their institutions for external quality audits and accreditation evaluations.

Second, out of the 10 focus areas for institutional quality audits, seven directly address issues associated with teaching and learning, namely vision, mission and educational goals; infrastructure and learning resources; academic and support staff; student admission and support services; programme relevance and curriculum; teaching, learning and assessment; and student progression (HERQA, 2006b). On the contrary, research and community outreach activities are merged to form one

¹⁵⁹ The provision addresses various issues related to the teaching-learning process, such as student-centred and active learning approaches, attitudinal changes and cognitive developments of students, fair and relevant assessment methods, creation of an encouraging atmosphere for learning, enhancement of the assessment skills of teachers through professional training, establishment of procedures for handling plagiarism and cheating and development of institutional rules and regulations to effectively guide the overall teaching-learning activities in higher education institutions.

target element for the quality audit. This reflects the disproportionate emphasis prevalent in the quality assurance system.

Third, despite the official mission statements specifying all three core operations, higher education institutions in Ethiopia seem to focus more on teaching and learning activities and have limited engagement in research and community service (Kahsay, 2012, p. 83). Thus, this leads to limited motivation for assessing the quality of research and community service activities, as suggested by the data collected from the studied institutions. The focus on teaching and learning seems to be consistent with the directive set by the Ministry of Education that gives priority to expanding access to higher education and increasing the number of graduates at the national level to support development and economic transformation.

9.2.5 Momentum for quality enhancement is in its early stages

Along with increasing the attention given to ensuring the accountability of institutions to quality standards and safeguarding the interests of stakeholders, the underlying purpose behind establishing HERQA also encompasses a strategic goal of developing a quality culture at higher education institutions. This is to be achieved by, for instance, supporting self-evaluations, facilitating peer reviews and carrying out monitoring and evaluations. In contrast to accreditation, the respondents from HERQA perceive quality audits to be more enhancement and support oriented evaluations. A quality audit constitutes the main element of the current quality assurance system, which is intended to support quality enhancement. The respondents from HERQA indicated that institutional quality audits involving self-evaluation, site visits, discussions with the management, academic staff, students and various stakeholder groups and follow ups on development work have the capacity to generate in-depth insights, provide lessons and recommendations and remind higher education institutions to recognise their strengths, good practices and areas for improvement. The data showed that quality audit was needed to cultivate a quality culture and develop internal systems, procedures and practices for quality assurance at higher education institutions. The strategic documents from HERQA further highlight the central role of the agency in assisting the induction of an organisational culture at higher education institutions that values quality and is committed to continuous improvement (HERQA, 2006a, p. 3).

The enhancement-related activities that HERQA has undertaken include raising the understanding of institutions regarding the need for systematic approaches for

addressing quality aspects, supporting the establishment and growth of internal quality assurance mechanisms, developing quality assurance framework and tools, facilitating self-evaluations at institutions and carrying out accreditation and audit evaluations, providing short trainings and workshops and raising awareness regarding the fact that quality is dependent on the multi-faceted activities that various stakeholders have to undertake, including institutional leaders, teachers and students. Moreover, despite the many challenges and limitations, the respondents from HERQA claimed that the activities of the agency since the mid-2000s have resulted in the gradual enhancement in the awareness, capacity and experience of higher education institutions with regard to quality and quality assurance. They also reported receiving positive feedback from higher education institutions on the impacts of the recommendations they provided based on quality audits¹⁶⁰.

However, this study highlights the lack of documentary evidence and other accessible and credible data that has been produced based on a systematic assessment of the impacts of quality assurance in the context of Ethiopian higher education. The absence of systematic data that can support the aforementioned claims impedes a thorough discussion of the improvements argued to have been achieved. Moreover, in contrast to the positive claims of the experts from the agency, the respondents from the public and private case institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers seem to widely share the view that external quality evaluations, such as accreditation and audit have had limited impact on higher education institutions. Their impact on tangibly improving the standards of education, research and community service at higher education institutions was reported to have remained largely unsatisfactory. Even worse, the data indicated that the momentum for quality enhancement began to further decline following the discontinuation of quality audits by HERQA since 2017 due to various factors. This change seems to have removed the main enhancement component of external quality evaluations.

The interrelation between quality assurance assessments and enhancement work can determine the extent to which a quality assurance system yields tangible improvements. Currently, there is not much evidence to suggest that the quality assurance practices, procedures and processes employed at most of the studied institutions are systematically linked to the institutional efforts aimed at stimulating

¹⁶⁰ In contrast to the relatively more strained and confrontational interactions that occur during accreditations, reaccreditations and surprise inspections, the review of the available institutional quality reports of the studied higher education institutions indicated that the recommendations provided by peer reviewers are articulated courteously rather than through the use of strong assertive language.

continuous improvements in the quality of their overall operation. The analysis of the interviews from the studied higher education institutions indicated limited engagements with regard to participatory self-assessments, periodic programme reviews, graduate tracer surveys, monitoring the satisfaction of employers and stakeholders, disseminating and discussing the results of quality evaluations at the institutional level, joint planning and implementation of development work, supporting institutional decision-making and updating procedures, practices and processes. For example, the previous institutional audit conducted at Wollo University found that the implemented quality assurance work has had limited contribution to improving the quality of the university's operations (HERQA, 2014). This was because of the gaps in disseminating the feedback received from quality assessments and the lack of the proper implementation of remedial actions. The audit report also indicated that curriculum reviews and development procedures have not been fully implemented. It underlined the limited emphasis that Wollo University places on quality enhancement. Additionally, Medco Bio-Medical College, at the time of data collection, was found to have practically discontinued its internal quality assurance activities following the closure of some of its programmes. This occurred as a result of unsuccessful applications for reaccreditation permits and a confrontation with HERQA. The interview and documentary data identified considerably little attention given by the college to assuring and enhancing quality. In fact, the data conveyed that the operations of the college have been gradually weakening.

The data from the studied institutions suggested certain aspects in which quality assurance activities have, to a limited extent, resulted in significant improvements. These include the gradual increase in awareness about quality, establishment of internal structures for quality assurance at various levels and allocation of a certain level of resources (designated staff, office and other material resources) to these units. The higher education institutions have also attempted to recruit staff for their internal quality assurance units with some consideration of relevant education and work experience. Perhaps more visibly than other aspects of quality assurance, the institutional policy and strategy documents that guide efforts aimed at quality assurance have been formulated at the studied institutions. The higher education institutions are gradually, but in a smaller scale, carrying out internal programme audits based on HERQA's standards. Additionally, the progress in quality enhancement reported by the respondents include the expansion of the assessment of various aspects of the teaching and learning processes. These broadly encompass the dedication of more efforts to the assessment of the course coverage and time

management of teaching staff, the practice of curriculum reviews and evaluations becoming common, the more active inspection of the standards of examination and implementation of continuous assessment, the checking up on the timely assessment of students and submissions of grade reports and the coordination of pedagogical and other demand-driven trainings provided to the academic staff¹⁶¹.

However, the pace of the progress has been slow because quality enhancement requires the development of a culture of continuous improvement, which, as the data suggested, was considerably lacking at most of the studied institutions.

Explanations for the slow progress in quality enhancement

The analysis of the focus group discussions, interviews, documents and findings of previous studies identified at least five key explanations that provide some insight into the reasons behind the weak momentum of quality enhancement. First, the data analysis found that HERQA seems to consider serving the demands for ensuring accountability a vital starting point for supporting quality enhancement at higher education institutions. These structures imply that, from the perspective of HERQA and the Ministry of Education, accountability and compliance purposes take priority over enhancement goals. For example, the minimum quality requirements that are applicable during accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations seem to be designed to regulate the standards of private institutions and their study programmes rather than follow up and support the development of internal quality systems.

Second, there are several gaps and underlying issues in the design of the current quality assurance system, which has hindered progress in quality enhancement. One of the issues could be the emphasis on assessing inputs and processes at the expense of addressing the quality of educational outputs. This is indicative of the insufficient attention given to quality enhancement initiatives (Abebe, 2015b). Another major gap in the current quality assurance system, which was identified during the focus group discussions with HERQA's experts, is the distorted sequence of the various types of external quality evaluations. Accordingly, the respondents criticised the current arrangement of the order followed for accreditations, reaccreditations and audits, and argued instead that quality assurance could be more impactful if quality audits precede reaccreditation evaluations. The disorder in sequence was argued to prevent reaccreditations from being carried out following thorough quality audits

¹⁶¹ For example, trainings on instructional skills for newly hired teachers, a Higher Diploma Programme (HDP) for teacher educators and English language classes for the academic staff.

and improvement efforts. Additionally, there is considerably insufficient practice of linking the information generated from quality assessments to tangible enhancement activities. The results of quality audits are not tied to funding or other forms of sanctions, at least, for public institutions. Moreover, the respondents argued that the communication between HERQA and higher education institutions is poor. It mainly consists of the agency sending directives and specific assignments to the higher education institutions and the institutions reporting on these instructions (also highlighted in Abebe, 2014). This suggests that communication occurs only during the short periods when the institutions are undergoing accreditations and audits or during the occasional correspondence concerning the tasks that HERQA requires the institutions to carry out. This illustrates the lack of regular communication such that, at times, formal communication may not occur for years together (Geda, 2014, pp. 255-256). This hinders frequent follow ups and monitoring.

Third, there is capacity limitation at higher education institutions and HERQA. At the studied public institutions, namely Mekelle University, Wollo University and Woldia University, the staff working in the internal quality assurance offices and coordinating the faculty-, college- and department-level quality assurance activities cited quality assurance as being a part-time responsibility. They also stated that the workload created by the routine academic and administrative tasks hindered them from investing adequate efforts into implementing and following up on quality enhancement activities. As discussed in Chapter Eight, this study found that internal quality assurance units lack sufficient human, financial and material resources to effectively discharge their responsibilities for assuring and enhancing quality. The scarcity of training on quality and quality assurance has created a barrier to developing the capacity of the staff members who work on quality assurance. Moreover, the review of HERQA by a panel of international experts found that the training that the agency has provided to the external auditors selected from the academic staff of higher education institutions is not sufficient for carrying out its responsibilities of supporting quality enhancement at higher education institutions (Henson et al., 2016). Additionally, the spatial distribution of higher education institutions across Ethiopia presents another obstacle for HERQA, as its headquarters and only office is located in the capital city. This prevents the agency from effectively enforcing its mandates and monitoring all higher education institutions (Henson et al., 2016; Lodesso, 2012).

Fourth, there is a lack of consistency in the commitment towards implementing the recommendations produced from quality evaluations and improving operations

after the evaluations are completed. The respondents from HERQA stated that, during the audits, most higher education institutions work with high motivation and concentration. Further, they often give positive feedback to the agency's external assessors, claiming that the audit processes have been useful to them, yet their commitment to working on quality assurance begins to decline after the completion of the external evaluation. This indicated that most institutions attempt to act on recommendations, improve their internal procedures for quality assurance based on the feedback and implement changes during and shortly after the completion of external evaluations. They do this while the memories of the evaluation are still fresh and the conditions are favourable. Accordingly, the respondents argued that such 'momentum gradually fades as the audit fever subsides' (HAUT3, 03.10.2018), thus limiting the scale of impact.

Fifth, the respondents widely criticised the lack of adequate support provided to higher education institutions by HERQA. The focus group discussions suggested that the agency seems to more readily provide support to those public and private institutions that it considers to demonstrate the appropriate commitment to quality assurance. On the other hand, it tends to focus on controlling those institutions that it suspects of operating unethically and pursuing profit-maximisation at the expense of quality. The lack of support, in terms of trainings, expert assistance and closer follow ups, weakens the capacity for quality enhancement.

Explanations behind the better progress in quality enhancement at Admas University

Interestingly, the internal quality assurance practices and processes at Admas University seem to combine compliance and enhancement purposes. The periodic internal quality assessments and monitoring carried out at the university serve the need to ensure that its activities are being carried out in accordance with the defined standards. These practices also ensure that the minimum quality requirements for accreditation and reaccreditation permits are fulfilled and that the feedback obtained from internal audits and external evaluations by HERQA are addressed to improve performance.

According to the analysis of the Admas University's institutional publications, some of its achievements thus far, as a result of implementing quality assurance practices, include its gradual growth from a small business centre to a college, then a university college and, finally, a full-fledged university, the increase in the number of its students, alumni and staff, the increase in the number of its branch campuses

and programmes, its timely securing of accreditation and reaccreditation permits, the positive results from external quality audits conducted by HERQA, its status as one of the few private institutions that have received a license to provide distance education, the several corrective measures taken by the empowered internal quality assurance office, its attentive implementation of enhancement plans and feedback from assessments, the improved status and attractiveness of the university and its developed and implemented standardised documentation system (Minda, 2017, p. 4). Admas University has used academic conferences, stakeholder discussion forums and press releases to promote its quality assurance system, which seems to have led to other public and private institutions considering the university a benchmark and assisting the enhancement of its image.

In contrast to the other institutions included in this study, the data indicated that distinct progress could be observed at Admas University in terms of utilising internal quality assurance procedures to improve the standards of its academic and administrative activities. The analysis of the interviews and documents identified five explanations for the relatively better progress of Admas University in quality assurance.

The first key feature and, conceivably, the major difference in the case of Admas University could be the strong concern and commitment that its top management has regarding the quality of education and quality assurance. This seems to have played a role in enabling the university to take the issue of quality seriously. The commitment of the university management also facilitated the allocation of the necessary resources for the institutional quality assurance efforts. As shown in Chapter Eight, Admas University has more than four full-time quality assurance officers working at its headquarter and other officers who coordinate quality assurance activities working at its various faculties and campuses. In stark contrast to this, the three studied public institutions (Mekelle University, Wollo University and Woldida University) combined have only a single full-time quality assurance officer¹⁶². They also have a number of other officers and staff members who coordinate quality assurance at the faculty and college levels and are required to allocate either 75, 50 or 25 per cent of their working hours to quality assurance activities. The growing financial success accompanying the improvement in its reputation was reported to have allowed Admas University to reinforce its capacity to further support endeavours aimed at assuring quality.

Moreover, problems associated with commitment to quality could be linked to the broader social context within which higher education institutions operate. For

¹⁶² Woldia University has a full-time director for its internal quality assurance office.

example, a study found that the current socio-cultural context of Ethiopia tends to place more value on diplomas and certificates than the quality of student learning, professional competence and merit (Kahsay, 2012, pp. 239-241). This could imply that quality of student learning is far from being genuinely valued.

Second, the university seems to have a clearer its institutional vision and has recognised the centrality of improving quality standards with regard to effectively achieving strategic objectives, building reputation and attractiveness and supporting the advancement of the university. It has developed the appropriate commitment based on the understanding and awareness of the decisiveness of maintaining high quality standards in education. Third, the internal quality assurance unit at Admas University is independent and empowered. This enables the execution of quality assessments, inspection of academic and administrative units, implementation of the necessary corrective measures based on the findings of quality assessments and enforcement of and follow ups on improvement activities wherein gaps are identified.

Fourth, the university has periodic and systematic internal practices for evaluating the performance of units and following up on development work. The internal quality assurance office conducts weekly, monthly, quarterly and other spontaneous audits. A notable example of this is the practice of evaluating and grading the performance of academic and administrative units every three months, which promotes better implementation of their annual plans and improves their commitment to quality. There is also a practice of actively communicating the results of quality assessments and sharing of experiences within the university community through, for instance, the various institutional publications and frequent meetings and discussion platforms. The respondents argued that this has raised awareness about quality, facilitating the implementation of corrective measures, improving coordination across units and promoting a shared understanding about the status of the standards of operations. Interestingly, the review of the university's annual plans showed that, in 2018, the university was still actively implementing the recommendations received from the previous audit in 2009 and integrating development activities into its work plan. The improvement work undertaken in the areas that were identified to require enhancement stretched to the extent of revising the vision and mission statements of the university. These practices provide a useful insight into the commitment of the institution to improving its operations and taking quality seriously. Such levels of commitment were not observed in the other public and private case institutions.

Fifth, the well-developed, standardised and internalised documentation system of the university facilitates recording, communication and follow up with regard to the activities carried out by all the units of the university. The documentation system enables the internal quality assurance office to easily check the operations of units, the results of various audits, the feedback provided based on audits and other types of assessments and the activities carried out by each unit to implement the feedback. In contrast, the other studied public and private institutions were found to have largely disorganised documentation practices.

In addition to the above explanations, the review of the documents identified various activities carried out by the university that are considered to support its quality enhancement work. These activities broadly include awareness creation regarding quality, implementation of external requirements specified by HERQA, experimenting with the quality assurance frameworks recommended by INQAAHE and International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) and participation in the national and international quality contests organised by the Ethiopian Quality Award organisation (EQA) and International Quality Summit.

Mixed evidence from previous studies regarding the impact of quality assurance

Studies that have investigated the quality assurance system in the context of Ethiopian higher education present mixed findings regarding the nature of the impact that the external quality assurance has had on higher education institutions.

In an analysis of the perceptions and practices associated with the quality assurance of six purposively selected higher education institutions, with an equal number of public and private institutions, Girma (2014) found that the system of the external quality audit conducted by HERQA was instrumental for the initiation and development of an internal quality assurance system at higher education institutions. Although varying in intensity across institutions, the study revealed that the key positive impacts of the external reviews included the introduction of the practice of conducting institutional quality audits, the establishment of internal quality assurance offices and committees at various levels; the development of institutional quality assurance policies and strategies; the raising of awareness on quality culture, the facilitation of the development of quality-related missions and vision statements, the practicing of various quality assurance procedures, and so on. In broad terms, the study concluded that the systems employed for accountability and improvement were found to be gaining momentum (Girma, 2014, pp. 126-132). The

implementation of external reviews was also reported to have played a significant role in facilitating the improvement of staff profiles and campus facilities at private higher education institutions. The results of the study indicated that the higher education institutions acknowledged the positive impacts of external quality audits.

Moreover, the results of the empirical analysis conducted by Geda (2014) indicated that external quality assurance required universities to undergo self-evaluation and peer reviews. This brought about significant positive impacts, such as universities becoming aware of their strengths and weaknesses and making progress in terms of strengthening the management of their quality assurance system. They did this by developing quality assurance policies and strategies, setting up governance structures and deploying the required human, financial and material resources. Another positive impact was that the issues of quality and quality assurance came to be included in the discussion of Ethiopian higher education (Geda, 2014, p. 331).

On the other hand, in an investigation of the quality and quality assurance practices of three public universities, Kahsay (2012, pp. 181-183) concluded that the time at which public universities formally introduced internal quality assurance varied. Some did so ahead of others, but no significant difference was found with regard to the adequacy and efficiency of their quality assurance practices. The findings suggested that HERQA's 'bureaucratic approach' to quality assurance was criticised for its incompetence with regard to being able to stimulate tangible improvements in the development and implementation of quality enhancement practices at higher education institutions (Kahsay, 2012, p. 234). The organisation of the agency and its way of operation was found to have inhibited it from effectively playing the role of an enabler and, thus, resulted in its unsatisfactory impact (Lodesso, 2012). As a result, practicing quality assurance for more than a decade at the national and institutional levels could not yield adequate achievements as expected (Abebe, 2015b). A critical review of the outcomes of the institutional quality audit practices concluded that 'higher education institutions have made only modest progress with establishing robust and comprehensive quality assurance systems' despite the efforts made by HERQA and other stakeholders (Teshome & Kebede, 2009, p. 193).

In a study of the quality assurance policies and practices of three public universities, Geda (2014) uncovered mixed results regarding the perceived impacts of quality assurance. It was reported that experts from HERQA depicted a more positive image of the impacts of implementing quality assurance at national and institutional levels over the years, whereas academic staff appeared to report

contradicting perception regarding impacts on various aspects. The results of the study reported that the students and academic staff expressed low satisfaction regarding the effectiveness and inclusiveness (of internal actors) of the current quality assurance practice. Similarly, Girma (2014) also found that the analysis of the perception of the students from public and private higher education institutions suggested that they appeared unconvinced about whether the state of quality in their institution has been improving. In general, the study found no conclusive evidence to suggest that internal quality assurance significantly improved teaching and learning (Geda, 2014). In fact, the study drew a rather stern conclusion which stated:

The self-evaluations took place symbolically at the higher levels of the universities and that the results of the evaluations were rarely used in a structured way in improvement of teaching-learning, faculty decision-making and planning processes. It is far from clear that whether the internal quality assurance contributed to the teaching and learning or transformed the student learning experience. It can be concluded that the HERQA's quality assurance policy and practices seems to be decoupled from internal initiatives to improve quality in the higher education institutions. Geda (2014, p. iv)

On balance, the findings from this study largely support the claims that quality enhancement seems to be at its early stage for most higher education institutions. In a few cases, quality assessments have been more visibly utilised to facilitate improvements in the quality of operations at certain institutions. An example of such an institution is Admas University, which takes quality assurance seriously, demonstrates better commitment to upholding the defined standards and allocates the required resources to the institutional efforts aimed at assuring and enhancing quality.

Limited political and leadership commitment to quality

The data analysis suggested that a key challenge associated with quality and quality assurance was the lack of genuine commitment to quality at the national and institutional levels. A majority of the respondents shared the opinion that the expression of positive political intentions from the heads of governments and leaders of higher education institutions has failed to be met with proportionate concrete measures to address the issue of quality. The review of national policy and strategy documents reflect the priority given by the government to enhancing access rather than quality with regard to education. This suggested that ensuring quality has been

a secondary goal for which adequate emphasis and tangible support have been lacking.

The data analysis suggested, as previously mentioned, that the quality of education has been a highly politicised issue in Ethiopia. The problems with quality in the education sector, in general, and higher education, in particular, have remained a sensitive topic in policy debates during elections campaigns and public discussion forums (Ashcroft, 2003; Areaya, 2008). The interviews with the selected researchers indicated that the opposition parties, members of the civil society, representatives of industries, various communities and other segments of society often criticise the declining quality of education and the standards of graduates. This leaves the incumbent parties to defend such accusations by making references to the progress achieved in terms of increasing enrolment and the number of graduates. This also extends to communicating political statements and technical reports that seem to magnify success stories and intend to portray or assert the solid commitment that the government claims to have to the quality of education.

Addressing the quality of education in his inaugural address in April 2018, for instance, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said:

As a big country and people, to reach the peak of the successes that we desire and also solve the problems that we have, we believe that the key solution is to be found in education and only in education. Even though the government is paying attention to the educational sector and working hard, particularly with regard to ensuring the quality of education, we notice that we have many homework to do and many activities will be carried out. While the expansion of education is among the commendable achievements of our government, as long as that educational coverage and reach is not supported with quality, our relentless efforts won't bear the fruits that we desire. Accordingly, starting from primary school all the way to the institutions of higher education, the government will redouble its efforts with absolute determination to make all our canthers of knowledge to focus on quality. Maximum effort will be made to ensure that especially graduates from our higher education institutions and technical and vocational colleges harvest knowledge that is comparable to their endowment of abilities. (Himbara, 2018, para. 32-34)

Despite such promises, the currently problematic HERQA has still been reformed. Neither was it granted full autonomy nor was its capacity substantially strengthened to a level comparable to the weight of the duty entrusted to it. Further, the agency has not even started to accredit public higher education institutions and their study programmes, which has been frequently recommended by researchers in the field. More than two years after the promises were made, the data showed no increase in political, administrative and material support or allocation of a dedicated budget for maintaining quality and conducting quality assurance-related activities for higher

education institutions and HERQA. Moreover, the focus group discussions with the respondents from HERQA revealed that proposals to reform the managerial, structural, operational, capacity and salary aspects of HERQA were submitted years ago by the agency itself. Furthermore, an additional set of recommendations was provided in 2016 by a team of international experts, commissioned by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), based on an analysis of the current and potential roles and functions of the agency. None of these actions have been translated into concrete interventions yet. This seems to be concerning, as the Ministry is aware that HERQA cannot adequately address the existing major quality concerns. This is attributed to the agency's current overall organisation, mode of operations and acute capacity limitations and the rapidly increasing number of higher education institutions.

The politicisation of the quality of higher education seems to complicate the application of quality assurance procedures in Ethiopia. As highlighted by the selected researchers, accreditations and strict quality evaluations for public universities may endanger or conflict with the existing political interests of the government. The respondents, including those from HERQA, stated that a certain degree of fear exists that introducing accreditations for public higher education institutions may result in the closure of several institutions and programmes. This, in turn, may cause tensions and create political backlash in the sensitive ethnic-based politics of the Ethiopia. This is because the increase in the number of new public universities took into account a balanced distribution of higher education institutions and the requests of regional states and ethnic communities for universities to be built for them. However, most of these young and newly established universities are not yet fully equipped with regard to facilities and resources, and some barely even have the standing of a university (“Universities Difficult to Consider ‘University’,” 2018). The respondents from the Ministry of Education also openly acknowledged the existence of these challenges. The lack of adequate essential educational resources seems to have affected the quality standards and overall reputation of these newly established universities. The government has focused for over a decade on constructing new public universities and officially inaugurating them instead of closely monitoring them after they began functioning and ensuring that they have the facilities necessary for their operations. Therefore, it is assumed that the implementation of accreditation for public higher education institutions may affect such sub-standard institutions.

In his opening speech for the 2017/18 academic year, the State Minister for Higher Education signalled a shift in the focus of the government from expanding

access in higher education to ensuring its quality. The minister announced the decision to divert the resources being used for constructing new public universities and expanding infrastructure (e.g. electricity, water and drainage systems, securing land ownership and expanding campus spaces) to fulfilling the inputs necessary for improving the quality of education at universities. Furthermore, 11 newly established public universities were prohibited from providing education in the fields of engineering and health sciences, as the educational facilities required for adequate practical learning were considerably lacking. The directive indicated that the government will turn its attention to providing capacity-building trainings and enhancing the qualifications of academic staff by widening opportunities for domestic and international graduate and post-graduate scholarship programmes. However, the data did not show noticeable changes despite the repeated promises of the government to provide more support to enhance the quality of higher education. This further suggested the lack of an adequate emphasis on translating the stated commitment into tangible actions that meaningfully address the quality problems in higher education institutions. The promises, formally expressed commitment and political statements regarding quality seems to be limited to 'serving the purpose of gaining political legitimacy' rather than a tangible concern for quality in higher education (RMG3, 11.10.2018).

A positive development after 2017 is the preparation of the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) study, which was carried out by a team of Ethiopian experts under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Education Strategy Centre (ESC). Extensive discussions have been held with key stakeholders about the resultant findings and policy recommendations. Currently, preparations are being made to implement the recommendations of the study and reform the education sector, which is expected to encompass higher education and HERQA. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education has announced that no additional new public universities will be built, as recommended by the roadmap study (HERQA, 2019d; Yosuf, 2018). Some of the anticipated recommendations of the study include the suggestion to grant more autonomy to HERQA, restructure the agency to make it accountable to the Office of the Prime Minister or the House of Peoples' Representatives (the parliament), require the agency to be led by qualified professionals from the field of accreditation and quality assurance of education, allow the agency to equally monitor both public and private universities, and reform the structure, hierarchy and functions of the internal quality assurance frameworks within public universities (Ministry of Education & Education Strategy Centre, 2018, p. 55). Similarly, other studies also recommended that HERQA employ uniform

requirements for both public and private higher education institutions (Henson et al., 2016; Salmi et al., 2017). These studies include the review of HERQA by a team of international experts commissioned by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the review of the performance of Ethiopian universities in Science and Technology by a panel of internal experts commissioned by the World Bank. However, the data suggested that such major changes have still not been implemented mainly due to the lack of political will from the Ministry of Education.

At the institutional level, as shown in Chapter Eight, the human, financial and material resources essential for internal quality assurance efforts are inadequate at higher education institutions due to the lack of solid concern and commitment from the institutional management. As a result, the engagement in quality assurance activities and processes is still a predominantly part-time activity at most public higher education institutions and mainly relies on individual initiatives than systematic and institutional mechanisms for its progress. The small number of part-time and largely untrained staff members of internal quality assurance units, for example, at Mekelle University, Wollo University and Woldia University are also occupied with daily teaching and administrative responsibilities. Thus, they are unable to allocate adequate time and commitment to quality care. Some previous studies also uncovered similar findings. Internal quality assurance practices and processes are yet to be properly institutionalised and integrated into the everyday operations of higher education institutions (Abebe, 2014). Further, the quality assurance system used in Ethiopian higher education is yet to grow beyond its early stages of development (Abebe, 2014; Geda 2014). The high leadership turnover, insufficient awareness and competence of leaders and fragile relationships with the academic staff have hindered the implementation of quality assurance at higher education institutions (Kahsay, 2012). Additionally, the frequent change of policies and directives presents a challenge for private higher education intuitions (Yirdaw, 2016).

Stimulating significant improvements using the current quality assurance practices requires more ownership and active participation from the academic staff (Geda, 2014). Strengthening the synergy between internal and external quality assurance processes and practices requires HERQA and higher education institutions to strengthen their commitment to effectively discharging their respective responsibilities as specified in policy provisions, legislations and regulating frameworks (Girma, 2014). A high level of institutional commitment is therefore

crucial for the development of effective quality assurance and the integration of the processes of continuous quality improvement with everyday operations.

9.2.6 Lack of systematic stakeholder engagement in quality management processes

The strategic documents of HERQA clearly identify customers and stakeholders of the agency and the overall quality assurance process. Accordingly, the agency has an extensive list of customers and stakeholders which include private and public higher education institutions, foreign higher education institutions operating in Ethiopia, associations of public and private institutions, students at higher education institutions and parents, national council of students in higher education institutions, citizens returning from studies abroad, graduates of public and private institutions, employers, chamber of commerce, Ministry of Education and Ministerial offices, Education Strategy Centre, Council of Ministers, Technical and Vocational Education and Training Agency, regional education bureaus, associations of higher education institutions, professional associations, foreign embassies in Ethiopia and Ethiopian embassies posted abroad, House of Peoples' Representatives, regional administrations, the public, development partners and continental and international networks of quality assurance agencies (HERQA, 2013, p. 3; HERQA, 2015, pp. 4-5).

However, the data analysis found that external and internal quality evaluations in the Ethiopian higher education tend to mainly involve HERQA and higher education institutions, and the participation of other key stakeholders was reported to be weak. The study suggest that external and internal quality assurance practices and processes lack adequately established mechanisms with which to secure the active engagement of key stakeholders in the designing, implementation and evaluation of the quality management model. The participation of stakeholders in such processes is yet to be systematic and impactful. For instance, there is weak participation of students and external stakeholders such as parents, alumni, employers, regional administrations and education bureaus and professional associations in quality assessment processes.

In its current form, the design and implementation of the quality audits and other quality evaluations fails to ensure the active participation of internal and external stakeholders. Respondents at HERQA recognise that higher education institutions place inadequate attention to including students, graduates and employers in the

scope of their quality assessments. Students and other external stakeholders such as employers and professional associations are yet to be actively engaged in quality assurance.

Currently, the preparation of self-evaluation documents lacks joint participation of key internal stakeholders in jointly preparing. Some respondents recalled instances where an entire self-evaluation document was prepared by a single quality assurance officer. There are gaps in adequately discussing with representatives of various internal stakeholders (students, support staff) and external stakeholders (alumni, regional partners, employers, business partners) during site visits.

The data analysis identified some explanations given by respondents for the overall weak stakeholder engagement in quality assurance processes. As such, respondents argued that HERQA's structural and operational arrangement is not conducive for promoting active engagement of professional associations in quality assurance. In some cases, members of some stakeholder groups such as professional associations and Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association have served in HERQA's team of assessors during accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations, but their participation has been as individual experts rather than as systematic representation of such associations. In addition, as discussed in section 9.2.1 and 9.2.2, the current quality assurance system is characterised by top-down orientations where HERQA, in practice, assume the role of a principal actor and owner of quality assurance processes. Quality assurance has been mainly the responsibility of HERQA. Moreover, respondents attributed the weak stakeholder engagement to limitations in awareness, understanding and leadership will. For example, interviews with respondents at the Ministry of Education, Education Strategy Centre and Woldia University did not explicitly identify the current weak stakeholder participation and acknowledge the value of promoting active engagement of stakeholders in quality assurance processes. In contrast, respondents at HERQA are aware that it would increasingly become impossible for the agency to singlehandedly assure the quality of hundreds of higher education institutions operating in both public and private sectors and thousands of programmes they deliver for a population of more than 100 million (HERQA, 2020b). As a result, selected researchers and respondents at HERQA suggested that the agency should explore scenarios where, rather than being directly involved in the evaluations of institutions, would instead support establish and accredit and supervise other smaller private accreditation agencies or agencies established by associations of higher education institutions who would directly carry out accreditation and audit evaluations to all higher education institutions. It was

indicated that such a system could be less costly for HERQA in terms of resources. However, such scenarios seem to be less likely, given the lack of political will from the Ministry of Education to approve such changes, tradition of state-led higher education system and the existing weak mechanisms for facilitating stakeholder engagement.

On balance, HERQA is gradually conveying more interest, at least in stated intention, to work closely with employers and professional associations (HERQA, 2018b), for instance, in deterring deception among private higher education institutions. Similarly, the review of the strategic objectives that HERQA planned to accomplish as part of the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) II showed that the agency aims to strengthen stakeholder engagement and increase the stakeholder satisfaction (HERQA, 2015). Acting on such stated intentions however seems to lag.

Despite challenges, the data pointed to positive developments. A recent good example of engaging stakeholders has been the ongoing extensive discussion on the policy recommendations of the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) held at national level with diverse groups of stakeholders and extending to grassroots level. The integration of the feedback from stakeholders is expected to promote impactful engagements in the future.

Mixed trends in the engagement of governmental stakeholders

In addition to HERQA, the governmental stakeholders which are covered in the empirical investigation of this study are the Ministry of Education and Education Strategy Centre (ESC). The analysis indicated that these two stakeholders tend to have different nature of engagement in quality assurance of higher education and partnership with HERQA.

The data showed a strong engagement of the Ministry of Education¹⁶³ in quality assurance processes. This involved providing budget and other important resources to public institutions necessary for delivering quality education, formulating policy and strategy, issuing legal frameworks and regulations which govern the higher education sector, determining national development priorities, introducing external

¹⁶³ A separate Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MOSHE) was created out of the structural and functional reorganisation of the Ministry of Education in October 2018 (more than a week after the researcher completed the data collection in the field). MOSHE however only became functional several months after the reorganisation was enacted in a proclamation (no. 1097/2018). Currently, all the power, duties and responsibilities related to higher education and TVET formerly assigned to the Ministry of Education have been transferred to MOSHE.

and internal quality assurance mechanisms, establishing HERQA, requiring higher education institutions to develop internal quality enhancement mechanisms, setting quality standards, conducting annual supervision of the performance of public and private institutions, reviewing the performance report of HERQA, monitoring the standards of graduates through compulsory exit exams, reforming the higher education sector, supporting staff development programmes, safeguarding the interests of government and the public. The discussions presented in various sections of Chapters Six, Eight and Nine have broadly shown the active role the Ministry has been playing in providing resources, implementing regulation and undertaking assessments and evaluation on HERQA and higher education institutions which aim to ensure accountability to stated quality standards. The Ministry is the principal actor in the governance of higher education institutions and HERQA, and both are accountable to it.

The Education Strategy Centre (ESC), as another governmental stakeholder, has a mandate to conduct studies on current policies and formulate policy and strategy proposals to the Ministry of Education, formulate reform guidelines and provide capacity building (FDRE, 2003, Art. 89). Interviews showed that ESC has played a key role in providing inputs and facilitating the revision of the higher education proclamation (650/2009) and preparation of the new proclamation (1152/2019).

ESC undertakes various activities directed at improving quality of higher education¹⁶⁴. For example, the centre has prepared a national qualifications framework and is currently awaiting the approval from the Ministry for the regulation guiding the implementation of the framework. ESC is expected to work more closely with HERQA when the implementation of the framework commences. The centre supports curriculum revision and development. Another example can be that ESC has recently reviewed the status and quality of distance education including programmes delivered on weekend modalities. Such reviews provide evidence for the Ministry and HERQA to take corrective measures. Additionally, ESC has prepared a funding formula for public higher education institutions which has characteristics of a performance-based model intended to improve efficiency. Although the researcher could not access this document, a respondent at ESC stated that 'quality was integrated into the operationalisation of performance' in this funding formula which is currently pending implementation (GSEA3, 15.02.2019). Moreover, ESC has supported the provision of short-term leadership capacity building training to high-level leaders and managers of public higher education

¹⁶⁴ Both ESC and HERQA were established in 2003 through the higher education proclamation (351/2003) to support, facilitate and guide the development of higher education.

institutions. This responsibility however has been transferred to the Ethiopian Institute for Higher Education (EIHE) since 2018.

Currently, ESC has little explicit cooperation with HERQA and limited direct involvement in quality assurance processes. The engagement of ESC also tends to focus on public higher education institutions and neglects private institutions. Interviews with respondents from Ministry of Education, non-governmental stakeholders and selected researchers and focus group discussion at HERQA found shared views which criticised ESC for its perceived overall unsatisfactory performance and weak impact. The overall engagement of ESC and other Ministerial offices such as Ministry of Science and Technology and Ministry of Health has been markedly low in contrast to the Ministry of Education.

Better engagement of professional associations in health sciences

The data from focus group discussions with accreditation and audit experts at HERQA suggested that the agency, in some cases, has closely worked with few active professional associations mainly in the field of health sciences namely the Ethiopian Medical Association, Public Health Officer Association, Ethiopian Midwives Association, Ethiopian Nurses Association and Ethiopian Association of Anaesthetists.

The faculties of medicine and health sciences at higher education institutions, as seen at Wollo University and Woldia University, rely on the National Accreditation and Quality Improvement Standards developed for medicine and health science programmes such as Medicine, Anaesthesia, Dentistry, Environmental Health, Medical Radiology Technology, Physiotherapy, Medical Laboratory Science, Midwifery, Nursing, Pharmacy and Public Health Officer programmes. These standards were developed by HERQA in collaboration with Ministry of Health, with the financial support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Strengthening Human Resources for Health Ethiopia project led by Jhpiego and members of relevant professional associations and selected experts from public and private higher education institutions provided expert and technical support in the process of developing the quality standards for the aforementioned programmes. The professional associations who participated in the development of quality standards represent fields such as Medicine, Midwifery, Dentistry, Environmental Health, Anesthetise, Radiography, Physiotherapy, Medical Laboratory Science, Nursing, Pharmacy and Public Health. The standards provide a

consistent and comparable approach to quality assurance in medicine and health science programmes taught across higher education institutions in the country.

However, the data suggested that similar standards have not been developed for programmes outside the field of health sciences. The participation of professional bodies in fields outside health sciences has remained practically non-existent. Respondents at HERQA, non-government stakeholders and selected researchers recognised that the involvement of professional associations in quality assurance needs to be strengthened.

Advocacy by the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association

The driving motive behind the establishment of the Association to promote cooperation, dialogue on common challenges, exchange of experience and enhance the voice and leverage of private higher education institutions in their engagements with HERQA, Ministry of Education and other government Ministries and regulators. The purpose of the Association seems to focus on enhancing the negotiation power of private educational institutions and advocating for changes which are expected to benefit the private sector.

The Association participates in the governance of HERQA through the membership of its president and vice president in the board of HERQA. Interviews suggested that the representatives of the Association participate in reviewing the planning, implementation, performance evaluation, and change and reform activities of HERQA. The participation also extends to several committees organised by HERQA for specific tasks.

The Association has no explicit and formal engagement in quality evaluations carried out by HERQA and internally at private higher education institutions. Interviews indicated that the Association has a committee on quality assurance which aims to facilitate sharing of good practices in the implementation of quality assurance among private institutions, but is yet to be functional.

An interview with a respondent working in a position of leadership in the Association highlighted two key issues that the Association has been advocating for. The first issue is the abolishment of dichotomous accreditation requirements applied in public and private higher education institutions. The Association has repeatedly called for HERQA and Ministry of Education to renounce discriminatory practices against private institutions. The other issue is the amendment and revision some directives and regulations which are argued to hinder the operations of private

institutions such as accreditation requirements for centres for distance education and requirement of partnership with international institutions to receive accreditation permit for distance education in graduate level study programmes. Moreover, the data suggested that HERQA and Ministry of Education recognise these challenges and reached an understanding on addressing such issues. However, the high turnover in the leadership of HERQA and reshuffling of the board have delayed the resolution of these and other outstanding issues repeatedly raised by the Association.

The emerging role of the Ethiopian Quality Award Organisation (EQA)

The EQA was established in 2007 as an autonomous public-private partnership between Addis Ababa University (public university) and Walta Information Centres (a semi-private organisation) and operates on a non-profit basis¹⁶⁵. EQA's main objective is to promote quality assurance in products and services and recognise and award organisations who uphold quality standards and demonstrate outstanding improvement in the quality of employees, processes, products, services and management. EQA seeks to stimulate quality assurance as a fundamental process, raise awareness about quality in the business community and facilitate sharing of best practices among industries and companies.

Despite EQA being a public-private partnership, the representation of private organisations at the board of EQA seems to be low compared to the over-representation of public organisations and government Ministries. The president of the Ethiopian government is the high guardian of EQA. The president of Addis Ababa University is the chair of the board. The members of the EQA board include president of Addis Ababa University, vice president of Addis Ababa University, deputy minister of Ministry of Trade and Industry, president of the Addis Ababa Chamber of Commerce and Sectoral Associations (AACCSA)¹⁶⁶ and CEO of Ethio Telecom (government organisation).

The main services EQA provides is conducting quality award based on assessment. The quality award competition started biennially but has recently become annual. The award competition held in 2020 was the seventh round of national quality award. The review of documents suggested that EQA also targets

¹⁶⁵ EQA has a charter and is registered as a Private Limited Company.

¹⁶⁶ AACCSA is a voluntary, non-governmental, business membership organisation.

providing training and consultancy¹⁶⁷. However, the researcher could not find sufficient data which confirm if EQA's engagement extends beyond organising quality awards.

The review of media coverage of the quality award over the past few years clearly indicated the presence of high-profile atmosphere around the award. This was seen in the attendance of the president of the country, heads of various Ministerial offices, presidents and vice-presidents of higher education institutions, leaders and managers of major companies and industries and other dignitaries and extensive media coverage given to the award ceremonies.

Despite the official non-profit basis, EQA was found to charge rather expensive fees to organisations who take part in the award. The fee is considerably higher than the highest service fee HERQA charges for accreditation of study programmes. EQA also actively markets its quality award competition to organisations through media advertisement and marketing staff. The interview indicated that EQA sends invitation to participation in quality award competition to the Ministry of Education so it can be disseminated to higher education institutions operating under its management.

EQA assesses the quality of organisations using an 'Excellence Model', which consists of two main elements namely, enablers and drivers for quality and results. Each accounts for 50 per cent of the assessment result. Enablers and drivers mainly focus on leadership, policy and strategy, resource management and process management. Results include customer focus, business performance and impact on society. Such criteria were reported to have been adapted from other international quality awards. Moreover, each higher education institution competes against the criteria of EQA's excellence model rather than competing against other higher education institutions taking part in the award competition.

The first round of the award competition mainly involves assessment of self-evaluation documents submitted by higher education institutions whereas the second round includes site visit by a technical committee of selected experts. EQA provides orientation to organisations taking part in the quality award competition on how to fill forms and conduct self-assessment based on its excellence model. Those organisations who score above 60 per cent are invited to take part in the second round of competition. Higher education institutions are then provided a written

¹⁶⁷ The description of the short-term trainings seems to cover various subjects related to organisational management, leadership and quality management. EQA also reported its collaboration in various projects with Addis Ababa University, Ministry of Trade and Industry and other non-governmental charity organisation.

feedback of their strength and opportunities for improvement. The ranks of the quality award given to institutions, from lowest to highest, include Certificate of participation, Certificate of admiration, Certificate of higher admiration, and third, second and first level excellence trophy.

An important critique of this method of assessment can be the application of an identical 'Excellence Model' to assess the quality of all types of organisations irrespective of whether higher education institutions, non-profit organisations or business. The award has four categories, namely manufacturing, construction, service for profit and service for non-profit organisations. Higher education is included within service delivery as one of the sectors in which EQA conducts quality award competition. There is an inadequate attempt to adjust the questions according to sectors. The generic, unitary and one-size-fits-all nature of the model does not seem to adequately account for the unique characteristics of higher education institutions as academic organisations. The analysis of data suggested that the quality assessment EQA conducts based on the excellence model seems less thorough, impactful and relevant to the distinctive operation and management contexts of higher education institutions, which distinguishes them from other business organisations. It seems that EQA has more expertise in the quality assessment of manufacturing enterprises and service providers than higher education institutions.

Another issue can be that the participation of higher education institutions in the EQA quality award competition is currently low. For example, only two higher education institutions took part in the award competition in 2017. Recently, Gondar University and Bahir Dar University from public higher education institutions and Admas University and Gamby Medical and Business College from private higher education institutions have taken part in the EQA award. The records of EQA show that majority of the organisations who have taken part in the quality award competition thus far are manufacturing enterprises and service providers.

Additionally, the analysis of documents and interview data suggested that EQA does not seek to become financially self-sufficient. Instead, it has continued to rely mainly on government funding besides service fee collected from organisations participating in the quality award. Recently, EQA has reported an acute shortage of budget and indicated that it could in the near future become unable to continue its operations without financial support from the government. However, the absence of national legal framework for governing public-private partnership compelled EQA to be established as a private limited company. This has created a barrier for it to receive direct financial support from the government. The lack of financial self-sufficiency can compromise the autonomy of EQA. Moreover, EQA does not have

partnership with other public and private higher education institutions, other than Addis Ababa University, who could provide financial support for its operations rather than relying on government funding. EQA thus could struggle to evolve into an effective, autonomous and credible external body for quality assurance operating under the initiation of higher education institutions.

Furthermore, the interview with a respondent at EQA indicated that the quality assessment EQA conducts in the higher education sector, rather than supporting and strengthening the functions of HERQA, seems to further stretch the already small number of experts HERQA has at its disposal to accommodate the accreditation and quality audit needs of hundreds of higher education institutions operating in Ethiopia and thousands of study programmes they deliver. The organisation mainly relies on contracting quality assurance experts from HERQA into its technical committee of experts who assess quality of higher education institutions taking part in the award competition. The respondent stated, 'Its HERQA who assesses the quality of higher education institutions for us' (NGSE3, 08.10.2018). The collaboration can enable the quality assessment of higher education institutions to be carried out by experts in the quality assurance of higher education. But this also implied that experts of HERQA are being occupied by quality assessment responsibilities outside their full-time responsibility. The low salary scale could be a factor pushing HERQA's experts to moonlight at EQA.

Engagement of development partners in capacity-building: Jhpiego and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)

The data suggested that the engagement of Jhpiego and GIZ, as non-governmental development partners, has focused on capacity building in higher education and TVET with emphasis on supporting HERQA and selected higher education institutions. These partners have provided support in the form of finance, donating equipment, technical expertise and policy advice. Their engagements have played a role developing quality standards for selected programmes and guidelines for internal quality assurance.

However, the engagement of Jhpiego and GIZ as international development partners thus far has been possible largely due to their motivation rather than as a result of systematic mechanisms at HERQA and higher education institutions which facilitate active stakeholder engagement. Both Jhpiego and GIZ also seem to work mainly with public institutions and tend to neglect private institutions. These development partners were also found to have little direct participation in quality

evaluations. The section below presents a brief discussion of the engagement of Jhpiego and GIZ.

The engagement of Jhpiego in quality assurance focuses on improving the quality of health science education. It provides training on health sciences and financially supports the training that HERQA provides to higher education institutions on quality audits. It donates equipment and facilities to public universities to support practical education in health sciences. Jhpiego's experts of health sciences in collaboration with health science professionals from universities and professional associations contributed to the development of quality standards and indicators for several health science programmes.

Interviews showed that HERQA cooperates with Jhpiego with the expectation that the experience from quality improvement activities implemented in health science programmes could be scaled up to other disciplines. Jhpiego works closely with HERQA, Ministry of Health and professional associations in medicine and health sciences. The data indicated that Jhpiego's involvement in quality assurance is mainly in public higher education institutions and only has minor engagement with private institutions.

Jhpiego has recently inaugurated a health workforce improvement programme which aims to enhance the quality of health science programmes delivered at higher education institutions through an institutional and individual level capacity building (HERQA, 2020c). It intends to support the quality of health care professionals, capacity of health care service delivery and management of health care professionals. The project focuses on improving quality of graduates in health science programmes and providing equipment and technical advice essential for health science programmes taught at higher education institutions.

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), as a development partner, has been working with the Ethiopian government in the area of education since the 1990s. Its involvement since the beginning has focused on providing technical support in work-based TVET up on the request of the Ethiopian government. For instance, GIZ has implemented an Engineering Capacity Building Programme with the objective of reforming engineering education and TVET from school based to work based, making engineering programmes practice-oriented, establishing university-industry linkage and supporting technology transfer. The programme involved deploying international long-term and shorter experts.

GIZ has carried out various capacity building activities. A notable example can be the Ethio-German Sustainable Training and Education Programme (STEP) I and II which aim at improving the quality and relevance of TVET and higher education

and, as a result, increasing the employment of graduates in selected industrial sectors. Another example is the construction of 13 new public universities, mostly second and third-generation universities, commissioned by the Ministry of Education in the University Capacity Building Programme (UCBP). The programme also involved collaboration with local contractors. However, the quality of the university facilities built by GIZ as a contractor were severely criticised by respondents at Wollo University and Woldia University and selected researchers. The respondent from GIZ, on the other hand, defended such criticism by pointing out that the finance provided by the Ministry of Education was relatively small and construction was carried out using cost efficient construction technology which was designed to save money and reduce material wastage and construction time.

The data analysis suggested that GIZ's intervention places more emphasis on influencing policy level dialogue in higher education and TVET. For instance, GIZ has supported the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) study expected to govern the policy and strategic directions of the education sector until 2030. A key focus area for GIZ's intervention has been supporting quality and relevance of higher education and responsiveness of study programmes to socio-economic needs. As mentioned during the interview, this intervention could be partly driven by the interest of the German government to 'dry the sources of economic immigration outflowing from Ethiopia to Europe' by supporting Ethiopia's ongoing reform towards a relevant higher education system which seeks to increase employability of graduates and create opportunities locally for gainful employment (NGSA2, 09.10.2018). This constitutes the intersection of interests between the governments of Germany and Ethiopia.

Additionally, the data showed GIZ's efforts to improve the capacity and operations of HERQA. GIZ has commissioned a review of the role and functions of HERQA by a team of international panels in 2016. The review identified key areas in need of development and offered concrete recommendations on how to improve HERQA's operations and quality assurance procedures in Ethiopia. Despite HERQA concentrating its resources on accreditation, the respondent stated that GIZ supports the agency to transform strategically, structurally and organisationally, focus more on quality enhancement and support the development of internal quality assurance systems and practices. GIZ seems to be critical of the growing momentum in favour of policing higher education institutions. It envisages a shift in focus to auditing and accrediting internal quality assurance systems of institutions rather than each study programme they deliver. It recognises that quality enhancement must be primarily carried out internally at higher education institutions. Moreover, GIZ views

programme accreditation as a less feasible quality assurance approach in the long run considering, on one hand, the rapid increase in the number of higher education institutions and their study programmes and, on the other, HERQA's scarce resources. This extends to supporting HERQA to move beyond inspecting educational inputs and processes and to initiate a systematic assessment of the quality of outputs. GIZ envisages assessing educational inputs and processes in the long run could be delegated to internal quality assurance units at institutions, and HERQA's external assessment could then focus on the quality of educational outputs. Additionally, GIZ supports the abolishment of dichotomous accreditation requirements applied to public and private institutions. The researcher found that such strategic views seem to reflect the recommendations from the review of HERQA by a team of international experts that GIZ commissioned. However, HERQA's lack of institutional autonomy and the Ministry's conflict of interest were reported as major obstacles for GIZ's engagement in supporting quality assurance.

As a key area of intervention for STEP, GIZ has been working to build the capacity of internal quality assurance systems at selected universities namely Wachamo University, Jigjiga University, Bahir Dar University, Kotebe Metropolitan University, Wolkite University, Debre Tabor University, Admas University. This shows the project has mostly engaged public universities, except for Admas University.

9.3 Discussion of key findings

This section summarises and discusses the key findings from the empirical investigation of the second research question. The question aims to examine the implications that the extent to which HERQA trusts higher education institutions may have on the nature of the quality management model implemented in Ethiopian higher education. This builds on the findings of the analysis presented and discussed in Chapter Eight, which explored the overall level of trust that HERQA has in higher education institutions, as examined through concern, capacity, openness and risk. Accordingly, the data analysis presented in this chapter links the overall level of trust to the implications it may have for quality management.

9.3.1 Mixed use of rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building

As discussed in Chapter Eight, HERQA tends to positively assess the concern, capacity, openness and risk associated with quality and quality assurance for public institutions while having a critical and negative perception of these dimensions for most private institutions. Accordingly, it was found that the agency has relatively strong overall trust in public institutions and tends to view most private institutions with a marked suspicion and less overall trust. However, the evidence from the studied institutions suggested that the unreserved trust HERQA places in public institutions fails to account for their significant gaps and limitations regarding the concern for quality. It also does not consider the inadequate institutional commitment to allocating the human, financial and material resources necessary for internal quality assurance units and efforts.

The empirical evidence from this study showed that this contrasting overall level of trust attributed to public and private institutions seems to have implications for HERQA's dichotomous application of control and reliance on shared values. This relates to the theoretical notions which the perspectives on trust building and insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust suggest, as discussed in Chapter Five, that a growing need for establishing effective control and regulation develops when the trust between actors is perceived to be low. Further, less demand for formal control and constraining instruments and greater reliance on shared values and norms and persuasion tend to be preferred in interactions underpinned by high trust between actors (e.g. Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Bess & Dee, 2008; Bijlsma-Frankema & Costa, 2005; Gamson, 1968; Hardin, 2002; Kovac & Jesenko, 2010; Kramer, 1999; McGregor & Cletcher-Gershenfeld, 2006; Sitkin & Roth, 1993; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Sztompka, 1999; Zucker, 1986). This study provided empirical evidence that substantiates these theoretical perspectives. As such, HERQA (and the Ministry of Education) focuses on subjecting private higher education institutions to strict regulations through discriminatory accreditation requirements, surprise inspections and generally restrictive regulations and directives. Public institutions are, in contrast, mostly considered by HERQA to share its values of providing quality social services, serving the public on a non-profit basis and operating responsibly and in accordance with legislations. The existence of the in-group sentiments shared by HERQA and public institutions and their sense of belonging to the category of public organisations, as opposed to the private sector, have largely accounted for the lesser requirements for

accreditation and strict regulation of their operations. In contrast, private institutions are alienated and considered to be intrinsically driven by a profit-maximisation that is largely perceived as being at odds with quality requirements. These trends provide more empirical evidence for the theoretical views that suggest that strong values for control emerge from negative and pessimistic assumptions about the motivations of actors and attitudes of suspicion. Furthermore, values for autonomy are likely to develop from positive and optimistic assumptions regarding the inherent motivations of others (Bess & Dee, 2008; McGregor & Cutcher-Gershenfeld, 2006).

The findings from the empirical analysis of the data suggested that both the rationalist-instrumentalist and the normative cognitive mechanisms of trust building are employed in the quality assurance of Ethiopian higher education, albeit to a varying degree. This was found to be largely dependent on whether the institutions are public or private. The study suggested that the instruments of regulation and control seem to be the dominant features in HERQA's approach to higher education institutions. In most cases, HERQA seeks to establish trust in the quality and quality assurance of higher education mainly through legislation and the establishment of regulative and accountability mechanisms. The data from the studied institutions implied that such approaches were more visibly employed by HERQA in its interaction with most private institutions, as particularly seen in the case of Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College. The prevalent suspicion towards most private institutions may have informed HERQA's reliance on its dichotomous accreditation requirements, surprise inspections, administrative and legal measures and other constraining tools that, in practice, explicitly target institutions in the private higher education sector. The emphasis on control and regulation instruments is further underpinned by the fact that HERQA's external quality evaluation has recently begun to focus only on private higher education institutions while ignoring their public counterparts. The findings of this study revealed that, since 2017, HERQA has concentrated its full capacity and resources entirely on accrediting the study programmes of private institutions and has suspended conducting audits. This has left public institutions without external quality regulation.

On the other hand, the findings of the study implied that HERQA, in relative terms, tends to rely on the perceived shared values and norms regarding quality during its engagement with public institutions. This also seems to hold true, to certain extent, for the few private institutions that it considers to be committed to quality and responsible operation, such as Admas University. An institution's reputation for quality and responsible operation seems to enhance HERQA's propensity to trust it and, therefore, reduces the agency's suspicion, vigilance and

need to seek additional information to crosscheck the preliminary findings gathered during external quality evaluations. The findings of the data analysis provided an insight into the significance held by previous experience and encounters involving deceptive behaviour and breach of regulations or responsible operation and commitment. These experiences can influence the safeguarding of quality standards by informing the nature of the expectations and approaches that HERQA's experts employ in future external quality evaluations. As such, the empirical evidence substantiated the trend wherein a positive experience with carrying out an external evaluation at institutions has promoted a relatively optimistic and trusting approach thereafter. It was found that encounters involving deception are likely to elevate the suspicion and vigilance of the agency.

Moreover, despite an apparent convergence of the stated values of HERQA and the studied higher education institutions regarding quality, integrity, respect and partnership with stakeholders, the empirical evidence from the data analysis indicated that the translation of these values into practice can significantly lag. The findings uncovered limited tangible commitment to quality, a tendency to focus on profit orientation, trends of widespread deception and violation of regulations, accusations of corruption and unprofessional conduct and inadequate practices of engaging with stakeholders. Additionally, the use of incentives was found to be scarce, which may further highlight that values that promote quality are lacking and quality assurance is yet to be institutionalised both at the system and institutional levels.

9.3.2 Empirical insights gained from Gamson's theory on power and trust

The application of Gamson's theory on power and trust offered three main empirical insights. First, the categories of low trust and high trust relations and their corresponding influencing strategies stipulated in Gamson's theory linked the assessment of the overall level of trust conducted based on the four conceptual dimensions of trust with the rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive perspectives on trust building. The insights from Gamson's theory link HERQA's different levels of the overall trust, as assessed by the conceptual dimension of trust, with the respective approaches that the agency employs to supervise and safeguard the quality in public and private higher education institutions. Gamson's theory addressed the gaps in the perspectives on trust building, since neither rationalist-instrumentalist nor normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building seem to

explicitly indicate the underlying overall level of the perceived trustworthiness of actors which justifies the consideration to use control and regulation or shared values and norms as key instruments to build trust. The two perspectives on trust building do not address the nature of the specific context in which employing control and regulation or relying on shared values and norms becomes a suitable approach. Thus, the theoretical and empirical links between HERQA's overall level of trust in public and private higher education institutions and HERQA's differential treatment of the two sectors and its application of dichotomous external quality assurance requirements would have been weak without the application of Gamson's theory.

Second, Gamson's theory provided more theoretical and empirical evidence on the tendency of actors to focus on the use of control and constraints as an approach to ensure trust when the overall level of trust is perceived to be weak, whereas relying on persuasion and building shared values and norms is likely to be the desired approach to build trust when the overall level of trust between actors is perceived to be stronger. This assisted in understanding the explaining HERQA's tendency to subject private higher education institutions to strict regulation, programme level accreditation, surprise inspections and additional discriminatory restrictions, while the agency entrusts public institutions to self-regulate their quality standards with little external quality regulation. Such application of such contrasting hard and soft approaches by HERQA were found to be consistent with the theoretical insights offered by Gamson's theory. Additionally, Gamson's theory could also contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of downward and upward control and influence tactics and their implications for trust relations between actors in a hierarchical setting, more preferably within an intra-organisational context, nevertheless extended to an inter-organisational analysis.

Third, insights from Gamson's theory and its intra-organisational origin were useful in understanding institutional dynamics between internal quality assurance units and academic units of the studied higher education institutions. The evidence from Mekelle University, Wollo University and Woldia University showed that their internal quality assurance offices tend to be perceived by departments and their academic staff as being intrusive and faultfinder and, thus, internal quality assurance practices, procedures and processes have been met with negligence and, at times, resistance. In contrast, the internal quality assurance office at Admas University tend to be positively perceived by the various academic and administrative units of the university, which seem to have enabled the university to secure the cooperation of its staff and students, advance in its implementation of a more coordinated quality assurance and gain visible improvements in its quality standards and overall

institutional reputation. However, the weak internal quality assurance office at Sheba University College and the practically non-existent quality assurance at Medco Bio-Medical College were found to have been involved in minimal visible internal cooperation with academic units.

9.3.3 Dominance of accountability and compliance orientation at the expense of enhancement

This study found that the current quality assurance implemented externally by HERQA and internally at institutions is predominantly driven by compliance and control orientations and gives insufficient attention to quality enhancement. The compliance and accountability-oriented quality assurance procedures and processes have fallen short of supporting tangible improvements in the quality of academic functions at higher education institutions. These findings seem to be consistent with some previous studies, which concluded that the implementation of quality assurance for more than a decade has brought inadequate improvements in institutional operations (e.g. Abebe, 2014, 2015b; Geda, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Tadesse et al., 2018). The review of the literature implies that quality assurance systems, such as Ethiopia's, that are primarily guided by the conceptualisation of quality as fitness for purpose may tend to be preoccupied with compliance-oriented evaluations. These evaluations consist of a calibrated emphasis on assessing standards and methods rather than the substances of transformations in student learning (Harvey, 1998; 2002). Moreover, statutory external quality assurance agencies that are established by or affiliated with governmental units may tend to focus on monitoring, regulating and assuring the quality and standards of the education provided at higher education institutions (Harvey, 2002). These trends seem to reflect the external quality evaluation that HERQA carries out in Ethiopia. Additionally, the influence from forces that are internal and external to higher education institutions that have shaped the quality assurance practices used in Ethiopia may further account for the orientation of the existing quality assurance system being towards compliance (Tadesse, 2014).

The rigid and compartmentalised design of external quality evaluations, emphasis on assessing educational inputs and processes, scarce support and capacity-building by HERQA, weak institutionalisation of quality assurance at higher education institutions, rudimentary practices of linking quality evaluations with systematic quality improvement efforts and lack of commitment towards allocating essential

resources underline the absence of a robust environment that can stimulate the development of quality enhancement practices and processes. The findings from the data analysis indicate inadequate engagement in quality enhancement efforts. This is despite one of the central roles of HERQA being supporting the growth of an organisational culture in Ethiopian higher education of valuing quality and being committed to continuous quality improvement (HERQA, 2006a, p.3). The disproportionate focus on evaluating the inputs and processes of academic activities and considerable deficiencies in assessing educational outputs and the quality of research and community service seems to contradict the working definition of quality adopted by HERQA as fitness for purpose.

The prevailing concerns of HERQA, the Ministry of Education and the government over the falling quality standards and underlying trust issues pertaining to the concern, capacity, openness and risk of higher education institutions in relation to quality and quality assurance seems to have shaped the purpose, procedures and evolution of quality management. Accordingly, the findings of the study suggested that such trust issues between HERQA and higher education institutions seem to have implications for the nature of quality management being implemented in Ethiopian higher education. These may include the dominance of top-down orientations in the establishment of quality assurance structures and practices, HERQA becoming the principal actor and owner of quality management processes rather than institutions, ensuring compliance and accountability being the dominant orientation, the inadequate attention being given to quality enhancement and lack of systematic mechanisms for continuous quality improvements, the focus on assessing educational inputs and processes with less emphasis on quality of outputs and student learning and the lack of systematic stakeholder engagement in quality management processes. Overall, the empirical evidence from this study leads to the conclusion that the principal motivation of quality management in Ethiopian higher education has been the need to control higher education institutions and ensure to internal and stakeholders that the minimum standards of quality are being met rather than a strategic aspiration to foster continuous quality improvement in higher education institutions. The evidence suggested that this could be fundamentally linked to trust issues. A growing reliance on accreditation as the main type of external quality evaluation, on one hand, and the gradual decline and subsequent discontinuation of quality audit on the other further characterise the current quality management model and the contrasting trustworthiness attributed to private and public institutions.

Accordingly, the application of accreditation focuses exclusively on private institutions and their study programmes. As discussed previously in Chapters Six, Eight and Nine, one of the key national pressures that accounts for the emergence of formal quality assurance in Ethiopian higher education was the government's intention to regulate a booming private higher education sector. HERQA's focus on accreditation can be associated with the fact that the quality assurance bodies established based on statutes in most countries are assigned the responsibility of accrediting higher education institutions, which was previously undertaken by governments (Harvey, 2002). The tendency to focus more on regulating private institutions could be common in countries, such as Ethiopia, where institutional and programme accreditations constitute the main responsibilities of external quality assurance agencies.

Such drives for ensuring the strict regulation of private institutions may not be entirely unfounded. As discussed in Chapter Eight, the analysis of data uncovered deep-seated concerns over the profit-maximisation motive of private institutions being a major threat to quality and the prevalence of deception, dishonest reporting and violation of regulations at such institutions, unlike their public counterparts. This implies the growing concern among key internal and external stakeholders, such as students, parents, government, employers and society, regarding the quality and accountability of private higher education institutions. In fact, the mushrooming of degree mills, fraudulent institutions and rogue providers (Van Damme, 2002) and the rise of 'pseudouniversities' (Altbach, 2001), in part, account for an increasing interest in regulating the quickly booming tertiary higher education market and the risks it poses to the welfare of the public. These higher education institutions often tend to be driven by a profit orientation and the commercialisation of higher education services.

9.3.4 The challenges for balancing accountability and enhancement orientations

Externally, accountability and compliance tend to take centre stage in the quality assurance implemented by HERQA (Akalu, 2014). This is, however, not unique to Ethiopia. For instance, Harvey (2005, p. 273) notes that the quality assurance practices initiated by governments and government-affiliated quality assurance bodies may tend to primarily focus on 'accountability and compliance', thereby ignoring 'continuous quality improvement'. At the institutional level, the empirical

findings further indicated that internal quality assurance practices and processes tend to be utilised, albeit fragmented and insufficiently, as tools for inspecting and monitoring selected teaching and learning processes. This is despite the intentions of the higher education proclamation (650/2009) seeming to favour the development of institutional quality enhancement. Previous studies indicate that quality assurance is yet to be structurally and functionally well-institutionalised into the everyday operations of higher education institutions. As a result, internal quality assurance units and their officers tend to be seen as ‘fault-finders’ by the academic staff (Abebe, 2014, p. 90). This could partly be because, as shown in Chapter Eight, most higher education institutions lack adequate levels of internal initiation and commitment and a clear sense of purpose and ownership. Meanwhile, some studies also found that the internal quality assurance units of higher education institutions continue to be hindered by several aspects. These include limitations in leadership support, lack of core values that substantively foster commitment to quality, inadequate allocation of resources, gaps in communication and flow of information, lack of capacity-building initiatives and incentive mechanisms (Abebe, 2014; Geda, 2014; Kahsay, 2012).

The findings from this study and previous studies (e.g. Kahsay, 2012) implied the presence of a trend resembling symbolic compliance with regard to the implementation of internal quality assurance at higher education institutions. However, Girma (2014, p. 141) stated the existence of ‘promising signs’ of an increasing commitment of higher education institutions to quality audit processes. The study claimed that quality assurance practices and processes are ‘going beyond symbolic compliance’ and that emerging initiatives are taken by higher education institutions to actively influence audits processes through for example ‘identifying own audit themes’. The evidence gathered from the institutions covered in this study indicated that such unprecedented claims, may to a limited extent, characterise atypical cases wherein a few higher education institutions, such as Admas University, have taken quality seriously and have actively strived to use improvements in quality standards as an instrument to facilitate the growth and expansion of operations, build positive reputation and secure financial success. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to consider such cases as reasonable representations of the level of commitment to quality at the majority of institutions operating in the public and private sectors in Ethiopia.

Currently, this study has not found conclusive evidence to suggest that the quality assurance practices, procedures and processes employed at higher education institutions in Ethiopia are linked to systematic institutional efforts aimed at

facilitating continuous improvements in the quality of overall operations. Further, accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations were not found to be systematically linked to quality audits (also noted in Tamrat, 2018). The link between quality assurance assessments and quality enhancement activities can determine the extent to which a quality assurance system yields tangible improvements. As such, there is a lack of structured procedures at most of the studied institutions for facilitating the utilisation of the valuable information that is produced through quality assessments regarding the institution's key strengths, good practices and areas requiring development. In such cases, carrying out quality evaluations may be limited to being a mere formality and 'ritualism and tokenism' than being a genuine effort to utilise these practices as useful instruments for driving institutional transformation (Newton, 2002). HERQA's inadequate follow up regarding the implementation of the recommendations produced from audits by higher education institutions could render quality evaluations ceremonial and a waste of critical resources unless these evaluations are linked to systematic improvement endeavours.

HERQA has achieved limited success with stimulating quality enhancement at higher education institutions mainly due to its compliance-oriented and bureaucratic approach, which is compounded by its acute capacity limitations. The bureaucratic approach employed by HERQA seems to have weakened the progress with regard to the enhancement and development of a conducive environment for effectively stimulating improvements in internal quality assurance practices at higher education institutions (Kahsay, 2012). Moreover, Tadesse (2014, pp. 149-150) concludes that the inherent methodological flaws and misalignments and the lack of a holistic approach to quality and quality assurance, which have led to partial benefits and other unintended negative repercussions, stem from three fundamental problems. First, the quality assurance system lacks a 'tacit theory of change' and is only supported by policy mandates. Second, the methodological flaws, misalignments and measurement weaknesses in the system have created an obstacle for adequately addressing quality at various levels of analysis. Third, inconsistent internal and external forces have fostered 'external ownership', impartiality and compliance in the quality assurance system. The empirical findings suggested that HERQA mainly acts as an auditor and operates less as an enabler. It has inadequate engagement in supporting the development of internal quality assurance at higher education institutions (also argued in Lodesso, 2012 and Kassa, 2019). For instance, it does so by building the capacity for improved quality assurance with training, developing more up-to-date tools for quality monitoring, and identifying and disseminating good practices across higher education institutions. Moreover, limiting the focus of

quality assurance to assessing educational inputs and processes and selected teaching and learning activities could hinder the development of comprehensive quality assurance procedures.

The capacity limitations of HERQA, particularly the lack of sufficient human resources with relevant and adequate qualifications, knowledge, experience and commitment, have created an obstacle for conducting the necessary quality evaluations on time and actively following up on the quality of higher education institutions and their progress with implementing the recommendations from quality assessments. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Geda, 2014; Kahsay, 2012; Salmi et al., 2017). In general, the aforementioned methodological and capacity weaknesses account for the criticisms forwarded by stakeholders regarding the agency's failure to enforce its duties and responsibilities and ensure the effective implementation of regulations for quality assurance as stipulated by the higher education proclamation. However, such capacity limitations, including deficiency in professional and technical expertise and resource constraints, are not exclusive to the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia. The literature suggests that these are common challenges that are faced by most external quality assurance agencies in Africa (Shabani, 2013; Swanzy et al., 2018). In addition, the study revealed widespread accusations of corruption and unprofessional behaviour against certain experts from HERQA. A recent discussion between the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and private higher education institutions revealed, besides the lack of support from HERQA, allegations of corruption and other serious issues of good governance concerning accreditation processes (Kassa, 2019). The forum also highlighted the need for reforming the organisational behaviour and working culture of HERQA.

The spatial distribution of higher education institutions across the corners of Ethiopia presents another obstacle for HERQA to effectively enforce its mandates and monitor higher education institutions (Lodesso, 2012; Henson et al., 2016). This is because the headquarter and only office of the agency is located in the capital city of Addis Ababa. Public and private higher education institutions have a number of campuses at various locations. This adds to the problem of retrieving accurate information about the performance of such campuses by the institutions themselves, particularly their central quality assurance units, and by HERQA. The review of the functions of HERQA by a team of international experts recommended that the agency should have a regional presence. It can achieve this, for instance, by establishing branch offices outside the capital to enable its capacity to closely monitor higher education institutions located in remote areas and provide support

and capacity-building training for them (Henson et al., 2016)¹⁶⁸. Collaborations with regional governments, education bureaus, higher education institutions and other stakeholders could also offset HERQA's shortage of capacity and support its regulation of distant institutions.

Additionally, certain previous studies found that the nature of the existing relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions may have impeded the development of robust internal quality assurance practices at higher education institutions (Abebe, 2014, 2015b; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Kahsay, 2012). There is fear and distrust in the interactions between HERQA and higher education institutions, particularly private ones (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018)¹⁶⁹. The findings of the study, as presented previously, uncovered issues that were frequently cited by the respondents as being the key obstacles for institutions to trust HERQA. These include the application of dichotomous quality requirements for public and private institutions, conflicts of interest and lack of autonomy, acute capacity limitations and allegations of corruption. The study also revealed that the overall level of trust that HERQA places in higher education institutions is challenged by several key issues. These include the perceived lack of institutional commitment to safeguarding quality, the limitations in capacity for supporting internal quality assurance efforts and the weak practices regarding open and honest communication. Further, another issue is the high risk associated with entrusting the self-regulation of standards and the maintenance of quality to higher education institutions with little direct external regulation and evaluation with regard to the fulfilment of these expectations. The inconsistencies between the stated concerns and commitment regarding quality and the associated practices imply the existence of weak values and norms that are common for higher education institutions and HERQA. This poses an obstacle for the development of mutual trust. In a deviation from the prevalent observations made in this study and other previous studies, Girma (2014) suggested the emergence of improvements in the communication and mutual understanding between the peer reviewers on audit panels and higher education institutions. This was argued to have enabled them to 'allay fears and build trust' (Girma, 2014, p. 132). These characterisations, however, seem to contradict the dominant trend observed across the higher education system.

¹⁶⁸ However, the selected researchers were critical of such recommendations and argued that establishing regional branches of HERQA would not address the existing complex challenges related to regulating operations and assuring the quality of institutions. This implied that fundamentally reforming the quality assurance system would be a relatively more sustainable solution.

¹⁶⁹ Private higher education institutions criticise the Ministry of Education and HERQA for frequently changing regulations and directives (Yirdaw, 2016).

The data analysis showed that external and internal quality management units are still, to a significant degree, perceived as fault-finders rather than as supportive structures that provide critical and constructive feedback. This may be partly due to the existing overly accountability-oriented quality management model and its emphasis on control and compliance purposes. The literature indicates that rigid regulatory systems can create an atmosphere that may foster distrust between stakeholders (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013). Such trust issues are pervasive in the relationship between HERQA and institutions and may explain the low level of stakeholder empowerment and engagement. The study uncovered the inadequate participation of stakeholders and professional bodies in quality assurance despite HERQA being tasked with developing stakeholder awareness and involvement by, for instance, promoting the establishment of associations among higher education institutions, students, professionals and other stakeholders (HERQA, 2006a). The review of the quality assurance practices of selected universities, commissioned by the World Bank, also emphasised that the participation of the academic staff and students in internal quality assurance processes requires improvement (Salmi et al., 2017). On the other hand, there is a gradual increase in the participation of certain development partners in the capacity-building activities aimed at supporting HERQA and higher education institutions. The active participation of all actors is necessary for quality evaluations to lead to visible improvements in academic and administrative operations. The contribution of stakeholders is crucial as HERQA and higher education institutions cannot fully assure the quality of higher education on their own. Further, quality assurance and enhancement also require the wider participation of other actors that have stakes in the quality of higher education.

Moreover, the tendency to focus more on accountability purposes than improvement may also be associated with a quality assurance agency's lack of experience and maturity and the quality assurance mechanisms it employs (Harvey, 2002). The empirical evidence from this study and some previous studies (e.g. Kahsay, 2012; Salmi et al., 2017) showed that HERQA has certain limitations that prevent it from operating as a robust and vibrant regulatory body. To achieve this, its current role as a regulator and controller may have to be scrutinised to enhance its capacity for facilitating and stimulating quality assurance in higher education.

Additionally, the study found a broadly shared notion in the literature, as highlighted in Chapter Three, that external quality evaluations tend to focus on accountability, quality control and compliance and on checking whether the minimum standards are being met, while internal quality assurance practices tend to be relatively geared towards quality improvement (Barrow, 1999; Colling & Harvey,

1995; Harvey, 2007; Kells, 1999; Vroeiijensstijn, 1995). According to the evidence from this study, the approaches that are currently being employed by HERQA in Ethiopia seem to have the underlying strategic aspiration of achieving quality improvement through accountability. This, however, seems to be at odds with the claims that the agency currently considers itself as being oriented towards quality improvement and that it ‘aims to achieve accountability through improvement’ (Girma, 2014, p. 9).

The empirical findings indicated an increasing demand and avidity for quality enhancement initiatives and the provision of support for expanding and institutionalising the internal mechanisms of quality assurance in higher education institutions. This could serve to counter the current pre-eminence of the accountability and compliance orientation and contribute to the development of a holistic quality management system. In the long run, further supporting the development of internal quality enhancement could constitute a more impactful and sustainable approach rather than substantially relying on external quality evaluations by HERQA.

These trends highlight the significance of striking a balance between external and internal quality assurance processes if quality management practices are to yield tangible improvements in the operations of higher education institutions. Balancing the accountability and enhancement orientations could extend the scope of quality assurance practices and processes beyond safeguarding the interests of internal and external stakeholders to addressing the needs of higher education institutions regarding the improvement of the quality of their research, quality and community services. Thus, the understanding of quality must consider the interplay between accountability and autonomy, as this may determine the nature of the culture that develops within higher education institutions (Aga, 2006).

9.3.5 Playing the quality game as a response to an accountability-oriented quality management model

As discussed in Chapter Eight, the current quality assurance processes are characterised by the prevalence of deception, unlawful practices and violations of regulations for quality. Private higher education institutions in Ethiopia have gained notoriety in the eyes of HERQA, the Ministry of Education, non-governmental stakeholders and the selected researchers for frequently infringing quality regulations and employing deceptive tactics. These tactics include submitting doctored

documents, making orchestrated presentations of facilities and resources, selecting staff members who are briefed and given scripts for the interviews with peer reviewers during external visits and allegedly bribing quality assurance officers in exchange for favourable evaluation decisions. Further, the data also uncovered practices of deceiving fee-paying students into enrolling into unlicensed institutions and unaccredited programmes by using fraudulent claims, misleading advertisement and, at times, forged accreditation letters. Manipulating and fabricating the profiles of academic staff and students are other deceptive tactics.

The current compliance and accountability-oriented quality assurance system not only seems to fail to prevent or halt these problems but also perpetuates them. As the findings from the analysis of the interviews and focus group discussions suggested, the engagement of private institutions in deception, dishonest reporting and breach of regulations could be partially attributed to a sense of resistance and resentment towards the rigid external quality evaluations which tend to focus on ensuring compliance to standards and regulations. The evidence from this study showed that, unlike the quality audits that are voluntary, process-oriented and improvement-driven evaluations, the compulsory, input-oriented and compliance-driven accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations conducted by HERQA for private institutions have particularly witnessed comparatively more deception and dishonest reporting. The direct and significant impact that accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations have on the operations, survival and legitimacy of private institutions and their programmes may pressure institutions into partaking in impression management.

Although quality assurance processes are expected to lead to accountability and improvement, the presence of tension and suspicion between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions during external quality evaluations may lead the institutions to perceiving quality assurance agencies more as 'patronising', 'intrusive' and 'bureaucratic' than supportive and useful (Aelterman, 2006, p. 229). The literature review presented in Chapter Three revealed that coercive external quality assurance can be perceived as invasive (Newton, 2002), as an instrument of surveillance (Barrow, 1999), as a political tool use for fulfilling accountability requirements (Kells, 1999) and as a process that may encroach on the autonomy of higher education institutions and the privacy of academic work (Kogan, 1990).

The literature further explains that compulsory, bureaucratic and invasive nature of external quality assurance can breed a climate of distrust that can coerce higher education institutions into engaging in 'dramaturgical compliance' (Barrow, 1999), orchestrated presentations, impression management and playing the quality game

(e.g. Baty, 1999; Frazer, 1997; Genis, 2002; Harvey, 2002; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Leeuw, 2002; Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013; Newton, 2000, 2002). The stress caused by the bureaucratic procedures of fulfilling the quality assurance requirements may lead to the 'window-dressing' of the activities of higher education institutions in an effort to project a favourable impression (Van Damme, 2000, p. 16). Rigid accreditation procedures may encourage higher education institutions to focus on reporting their strengths while concealing their perceived weaknesses, thus hindering the capacity of such quality assessments for stimulating tangible institutional improvements using an honest critical self-examination (Trow, 1996).

Moreover, the agency theory states that the opportunistic behaviour of higher education institutions may include the distortion of information, wherein academic and administrative units intentionally provide wrong, misleading or untruthful information to governments and agencies regarding their performance (Kivistö, 2007) to create a favourable impression and institutional image. Such theoretical perspectives may provide an insight into why many Ethiopian private institutions tend to polish, fabricate or overstate their performance to try to appear as lawful, high-quality and thriving institutions in the eyes of HERQA, Ministry of Education, stakeholders and the public.

These trends create doubts regarding the extent to which quality assessments can produce accurate, reliable and useful information about institutional operations and regarding the readiness of higher education institutions to embrace quality assurance as a valuable process. The violations of standards and regulations can damage the quality of education and the standards of academic functions and aggravate the recurrent breaches of public trust and confidence in private higher education institutions (Tesfaye, 2019). It can also jeopardise the interest and welfare of stakeholders and tarnish the already compromised reputations of private higher education institutions (HERQA, 2019e; Tesfaye, 2019). Moreover, such practices negate the claims, put forth by Girma (2014), that the trust and cooperation between HERQA and higher education institutions is growing and that the institutions have stopped seeing the agency as an antagonist and moved towards acceptance and cooperation.

The prevalence of deception and violations of regulation constitute formidable barriers to the development of a dynamic quality culture in higher education institutions. A robust quality assurance system is required to induce the institutional will to cultivate a culture of honest and critical self-assessment. This can stimulate internal processes that support continuous quality improvement by, for instance,

identifying and reinforcing institutional strengths and addressing aspects of institutional operation that need further development.

9.3.6 Previous experience can inform overall trust and approaches

The empirical evidence from this study supports the theoretical views that identify familiarity, interactional experience and previous transactions between actors as important elements through which actors can build or erode their propensity to trust each other (e.g. Hardin, 2002; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Li et al., 2012; Luhmann, 1988; Migliore & DeClouette, 2011; Stensaker & Gornitza, 2009). The development or weakening of trust could be the function of the cumulative interactions between actors (Kramer, 1999). Such theoretical insights tend to consider trust a relational construct (e.g. Kramer, 1999; Migliore & DeClouette, 2011). Further, reputation is said to influence the development of trust between actors (De Boer, 2002; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Similarly, insights from the agency theory state that the development of trust between higher education institutions and external stakeholders, such as governments (and quality assurance agencies), and the choice of governance mechanisms could be shaped by the length of the relationship shared, level of exposure to each other's behaviour and reputation of institutions (Kivistö, 2007; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015).

The findings showed that audit and accreditation experts from HERQA tighten their approach and put extra effort into verifying information when conducting site visits for private higher education institutions that have previous records of deception and dishonest reporting. It seems that, with time, private higher education institutions have improved their skills of playing the quality game, and, similarly, HERQA's experts have gained more experience regarding how to detect deceptive tactics, malpractices and distorted information during site visits. The literature shows that, in such cases, higher education institutions may tend to 'learn how to play the system and pass the test rather than aim to improve' their academic operations (Mkhize & Cassimjee, 2013, p. 1268). As a result, higher education institutions may develop a 'culture of compliance' and invest their resources in the game of quality assessments (Dill, 1998, p. 72). This means it could be challenging to conduct honest and critical quality assessments and ensure the continued impact of the information generated from such assessments without the genuine commitment for quality and quality assurance at institutions.

The informal discussions with some of the experts from HERQA indicated the existence of some type of informal blacklist of private institutions that have a reputation for engaging in deceptions and staged performances. This also suggests that the relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions evolves over time, partly depending on previous experiences and perceived reputations that individual higher education institutions have for deception and violation of regulations for quality standards or for honesty and commitment to quality management.

Tension, suspicion and disagreement arise in the relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions when the issued regulations and directives regarding quality are violated by institutions. This is a more frequent occurrence at private institutions, and seldom happens at the public ones. This seems to undermine the propensity of HERQA's experts to trust such higher education institutions and, instead, raises the need to employ a cautious approach and strict evaluations and regulations. The use of surprise inspections by HERQA, mostly to control, regulate and monitor private higher education institutions, seems to emanate from the widespread suspicion and low trust that HERQA has towards a majority of these institutions. A breach of trust, as argued in the literature, may incite a reaction of confusion, shock, anger, betrayal, anxiety and embarrassment from the trustor (Hawley, 2014; Mishra, 1996; Zucker, 1986). In such cases, a broken trust can lead to disappointment and suspicion that could subsequently result in distrust (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017). As highlighted in Chapters Two and Five, the literature reiterates the fragile nature of trust. Building trust can be arduous and challenging, but a certain degree of trust built through such processes can be destroyed within a relatively shorter period of time and, in some cases, as a result of isolated instances (Baier, 1986; Bergan, 2012; Hardin, 2002; Kramer, 1999; Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2017; McKnight et al., 1998; Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009; Stensaker & Maassen, 2015; Zucker, 1986). The empirical findings illustrated that the experiences from previous evaluations may inform how accreditation and audit experts assess the perceived trustworthiness of an institution and shape the approaches used for future external evaluations.

Additionally, the empirical findings of this study are consistent with the notion that the perception of quality can inform trust. As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, the higher education institutions that have a positive reputation and are perceived by external stakeholders, such as quality assurance agencies, as institutions that deliver quality education and research can be more easily trusted than those institutions that are infamous for compromising quality standards and having a

questionable commitment to quality (Bergan, 2012). As such, the case of Admas University serves as evidence of the presence of a few reputable institutions that demonstrate better commitment to ensuring quality standards, even to the extent of being considered a benchmark for the internal quality assurance practices of some public universities. Such exceptional cases provide useful insights given the fact that the private higher education sector was found to be generally viewed by HERQA and the Ministry of Education with considerable suspicion and weak overall trust.

9.3.7 Dichotomy in accreditation: Inconclusive evidence of quality improvement and restoration of trust

The dichotomous regulations in quality assurance subject private institutions to compulsory programme accreditations and reaccreditations, whereas public institutions are exempted from similar requirements. In fact, public institutions have been left without explicit external quality evaluations by HERQA following the discontinuation of audits in 2017. As a result, the external quality assurance of HERQA has focused mainly—of late, exclusively—on accrediting and inspecting private institutions.

This study however did not find conclusive evidence that could provide insights into the consequences of these dichotomous regulations for the quality standards of public and private institutions and, subsequently, for their progress with recovering and building the trust of HERQA and other stakeholders. The data analysis identified isolated claims made by certain respondents that the double standard implemented by HERQA seems to have enabled private higher education institutions, at least temporarily, to meet the minimum quality standards essential for delivering study programmes with acceptable quality. Some of the selected researchers further argued that private institutions could be regarded as having relatively better awareness and experience in terms of quality assurance than most public institutions, but the researcher could find no records of such reported improvements. The study identified a lack of proper documentation practices for quality assurance and enhancement activities at most of the studied institutions except for Admas University. This creates a shortage of credible evidence that can illustrate how being subjected to or exempted from strict accreditation requirements may have impacted the status of quality standards and core activities.

Moreover, a review of previous studies reported, but failed to adequately explain, signs of some positive effects of accreditation for private institutions. For example,

Saketa (2014, p. viii) claimed that ‘a quality culture had been developed in private higher education institutions’, while, in contrast, public institutions have made progress in establishing structured quality assurance processes, albeit relatively recently. The study also concluded that ‘significant differences’ exist between public and private institutions regarding the implementation of internal quality assurance practices. It was further reported that the management of private higher education institutions was ‘more committed’ to quality assurance than that of public institutions. The study also argued that these differences are further manifested in the ‘varied’ impacts that quality assurance has had on the quality of core institutional activities (p. ix). Further, another study suggested that private higher education institutions generally comply with the recommendations of external quality audits more than their public counterparts (Girma, 2014).

A surface-level interpretation of these claims may consider the alleged differences a possible outcome of the double standard that exists in the external quality assurance implemented by HERQA in the public and private sector¹⁷⁰. However, if such a developed quality culture does exist at private higher education institutions, it would be logical to question why HERQA and the Ministry of Education have continued to employ tight control over private institutions. Unfortunately, the aforementioned studies fail to offer a plausible explanation for this apparent paradox. The claims of a developed quality culture existing at private institutions do not seem to be consistent with the essentially rigid, coercive and controlling instruments of quality assurance that these institutions are currently subjected to by HERQA. The reported improvements in quality standards are not reflected in the nature of the current relationship that these institutions have with HERQA and the outlook widely shared among stakeholders on the quality and trustworthiness of most private institutions. The claims also contradict the deception, violations of regulations and tendencies of employing superficial quality assurance practices that are rampant among private higher education institutions.

On the other hand, public institutions have continued to receive seemingly unreserved trust from HERQA and the Ministry of Education despite being exempted from accreditation and the gradual reduction and subsequent

¹⁷⁰ The sample set of private institutions used by Saketa (2014) includes St. Mary’s University College and Admas University College. Both of these were later promoted to the status of full-fledged universities and can be considered to be among the few private institutions that have demonstrated better commitment to and engagement in quality assurance. Similarly, the findings of Girma (2014) were based on data gathered from St. Mary’s University College and Unity University. The markedly positive benefits that were reportedly caused by the implementation of strict programme accreditation may have been, in part, due to the lack of diversity among the private higher education institutions included in the samples used in these studies.

abandonment of the requirements to undergo external quality audits. Public institutions seem to be trusted without visible demands for presenting evidence to prove their maintenance of quality standards in education, research and community service.

In light of this inconclusive evidence gathered from this study, HERQA and the Ministry of Education need to thoroughly evaluate whether the dichotomous accreditation requirements, which subject private institutions to strict programme accreditation but exempt their public counterparts from similar requirements, have benefited private higher education institutions and, subsequently, made them significantly more trustworthy and credible. Have the graduates of private higher education institutions become of a better quality compared to those from public institutions as a result of all the study programmes delivered undergoing accreditation and reaccreditation evaluations? Does being subjected to strict accountability-oriented quality evaluation by itself guarantee better quality and, in turn, improved trustworthiness? These issues need to be explored in detail to address policy-related concerns pertaining to the existing double standard based on tangible evidence.

The empirical findings suggest that this was not the case in the relationship between a majority of private institutions and HERQA. Particularly, the evidence obtained from Sheba University College and Medco Bio-Medical College indicated that undergoing programme accreditation evaluations, surprise inspections and being subjected to broader strict regulation instruments may not guarantee the stimulation of institutional commitment to taking quality seriously, the improvement in standards of academic services provided to stakeholders and the development of internal quality assurance mechanisms. Further, the case of Medco Bio-Medical College provided a notable example of a relationship with HERQA that is mainly characterised by tension, confrontation and suspicion rather than by a recovering trust.

The discussion presented in Chapter Four highlighted the role of quality assurance in supporting institutions with creating, restoring and rebuilding public trust (e.g. Amaral & Rosa, 2010; Baert & Shipman, 2005; Bergan, 2012; Elassy, 2015; Harvey, 2011; Huber, 2013; Okebukola, 2014; Stensaker and Maassen, 2015; Trow, 1996; Van Damme, 2002; Yingqiang & Yongjian, 2016; Zumeta, 2011). Accordingly, the empirical evidence, particularly that from the deviant case of Admas University, suggested that undergoing external and internal quality assurance may enable higher education institutions to recover the trust of external quality assurance agencies, stakeholders and the public if they undertake at least three vital activities:

- 1) demonstrate strong commitment to quality by periodically undergoing external quality evaluations and institutionalising robust internal quality assurance
- 2) utilise valuable information generated through quality assurance to inform systematic improvements in core activities, and
- 3) demonstrate the evidence of improvements in quality and project an institutional image that reflects progress in striving to uphold standards.

It can be argued that the degree of the impact that quality assurance practices, processes and procedures can have may depend on the extent to which an internal quality assurance and quality culture has been developed within a higher education institution. This can enable an institution to systematically utilise the valuable data generated by quality assessment practices to improve the standards of institutional performance. The literature recognises that demonstrating evidence to reflect quality in enhanced student learning, beyond merely passing the accreditation and audit evaluations conducted by external quality assurance agencies, is vital for institutions to regain the trust of the public (Schindler et al., 2015).

On balance, the theoretical notion of quality assurance as a tool that can enable higher education institutions to secure and restore public trust merits more empirical investigation and analysis. Stensaker and Harvey (2011a) highlight the scarcity of evidence despite enhancing trust, legitimacy and quality being the underlying intentions and expected outcomes of most accountability schemes applied in higher education. Further studies are also needed to thoroughly investigate the exact nature and magnitude of the impacts that quality assurance has had at various levels.

10 IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The key findings from the data analysis have been thoroughly discussed in sections 8.6 and 9.3 in relation to the insights from the theoretical and analytical framework, literature review and findings from previous studies. This chapter highlights the major implications of the findings gathered from the empirical investigation, which was presented in the previous chapters, of the two research questions posed at the outset. The discussion highlights theoretical and methodological implications. This chapter also outlines the implications the study may have for policy and practice. Finally, the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are presented.

10.1 Theoretical implications and reflections on the theoretical and analytical framework

Exploring trust in relationships requires a comprehensive understanding of the specific context within which the concept of trust is analysed. The perception of what trust is and how it can be built can significantly vary across contexts, which underscores the importance of a contextually and culturally nuanced examination of trust.

The consideration of trust as a three-part relation (Hardin, 2002) enabled to link the discussion of the relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions to the investigation of trust in quality and quality assurance and its implications for quality management. The empirical evidence from this study highlights that a comprehensive analysis of trust requires taking the trustor, trustee and the object of trust into account.

As the analysis of the literature presented in Chapter Two suggests, the prominent perspectives on understanding the notion of trust can be more broadly grouped into two distinct views (e.g. Butler, 1991; Hardin, 2002; Hawley, 2014; Scott, 1980). The first essentially sees trust in a generalised sense, which has little to do with the characteristics of the actors involved and context of the relationship in which it is analysed. The involved actors are assumed to generally trust others, and the

outcomes of this are expected to be positive or beneficial for the trustor. This perspective prevents a contextually specific application and meaningful discussion of the concept in a manner that is responsive to the nuances of diverse circumstances. This conceptualisation seems to be particularly popular in the political science, business and marketing literature. The other starkly different perspective considers trust to be a concept whose meaning is deeply rooted in the specific context within which it is analysed. This notion attaches significance to the attributes of the actors involved (such as expectations regarding intention, competence, openness, risk and willingness), the nature of the relationship they share, the particular object of trust and the overall context at hand. Since it allows for a more flexible and realistic analysis, this perspective on understanding trust was found to be more suitable for theoretical and empirical applications in higher education research.

The theoretical and analytical framework was found to be useful for theoretically and empirically exploring the trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions and analysing the implications this may have for the nature of the quality management model. The overall level of trust a quality assurance agency may place in higher education institutions regarding quality and quality assurance can involve an assessment of concern, capacity, openness and risk. Thus, the framework provided a more comprehensive and contextually relevant account of trust.

As such, this study could be considered a pioneering investigation that theoretically and empirically linked trust, quality management and the nature of the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. The theoretical and analytical framework enabled the establishment of these crucial links, which has not been previously attempted in higher education research. This was possible by integrating four separate models into a unified theoretical and analytical framework. This was crucial because answering the two research questions required drawing on a combination of perspectives, as each available model lacks comprehensiveness if considered separately. The construction of the framework by integrating multiple models also supported theory triangulation. The framework constructed and applied in this study could provide insights for future studies focusing on issues related to trust and quality assurance in higher education.

Further, risk was adopted as a separate dimension of trust in the theoretical and analytical framework applied in this study, which is unlike a majority of the available conceptualisations of trust found in the literature. This approach highlights the uncontested relation between risk and trust and contributes to the advancement of theoretical and empirical studies on trust by presenting risk as an unavoidable

component of trust. The aggregation of concern, capacity, openness and risk constitutes a collective assessment of overall trust.

The study also recognises the value of understanding trust as an encapsulated interest (Hardin, 2002) for theoretical and empirical investigations in higher education. The notion of trust as an encapsulated interest was found to be consistent with the conceptualisation of concern as a dimension of trust.

The framework was constructed based on solid theoretical and empirical knowledge gathered from the literature. It was built from rich insights into trust, trust theories and influence strategies developed in fields mainly outside higher education, such as organisational studies, management, business, sociology and other fields. The rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive perspectives on trust building, compared to the other elements of the theoretical and analytical framework, were particularly further expanded by Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009) and Stensaker and Maassen (2015) to inform various issues in higher education, such as governance and quality assurance. The construction of the framework could facilitate the inter-disciplinary application of theoretical and analytical models, and this may contribute to the development of theory and research in higher education. This could be vital because, as shown in Chapter Four, the application of trust in higher education studies, in general, and in analysing quality assurance issues is still in its early stages. The discussion of trust is not well-developed in the higher education literature (Pope, 2004). The arguments presented in Chapter Five also indicate the lack of well-established theories and analytical frameworks within the higher education literature that are capable of exploring, describing and analysing issues related to trust between higher education institutions and external quality assurance practices and other aspects of the relationship between internal and external quality assurance structures in higher education.

The framework enabled to capture the diverse facets of the external quality regulations employed by a quality assurance agency. This was demonstrated in the discussion of the dichotomous accreditation requirements applied by HERQA for public and private institutions and how this may be informed by the agency's contrasting expectations regarding the trustworthiness of institutions. The framework allowed to identify and explain the nuances that exist within the relationship between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions.

The study suggests that the legal status of higher education institutions may influence the extent of trust that external stakeholders tend to place in them. Governments may respond to the public-private divide with a varying mix of accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models and

separately applying rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building (also noted in Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). In such cases, depending on the contextual realities, private higher education institutions may be primarily perceived, more than public ones, as sources of concern for the quality of education due to their perceived profit-maximisation motive.

The discontinuation of external quality audits since 2017, which were the only type of external quality evaluations that public higher education institutions were subjected to, presents interesting theoretical insights. It suggests that the current reality of the relationship between HERQA and public institutions in Ethiopia is consistent with the theoretical scenario wherein a quality assurance agency entrusts the self-regulation of standards and maintenance of quality to higher education institutions with little direct external regulation and evaluation of the fulfilment of these expectations. The decision of HERQA to allocate all its resources exclusively to accrediting and monitoring private higher education institutions and to leave public higher education institutions largely unregulated, during its period of acute shortage of human resources and rising pressure from government, Ministry of Education and the public for reinforcing strict control of the sector, clearly demonstrates the trust that the agency accords the public sector and prevalent distrust towards the private sector. Such periods of resource deficiency, growing pressures and the uncertainties prevailing in the higher education sector seem to present a telling test of trust in the strategic and operational choices of the agency regarding its engagement with public and private higher education institutions. It showed that HERQA perceives little or moderate risk associated with abandoning external quality evaluations at public institutions. It also underscores HERQA's willingness to assume this risk instead of maintaining direct external regulation. This indicates HERQA's (and perhaps that of the Ministry of Education's), overall strong trust in public institutions despite the evidence from the studied institutions suggesting that this trust may have been misplaced. This also suggests, as discussed in the theoretical and analytical framework, that behaviour that destroys trust tends to be easily noticeable and carry more weight and impact than behaviour that builds trust (Kramer, 1999; Slovic, 1993). This may perpetuate the presumptive distrust towards private institutions.

The concerns and interests of governments can constitute a crucial element of the relationship that exists between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. Particularly, this is more likely in higher education systems where governments play a more dominant role than, for instance, the market and where quality assurance agencies are funded by and accountable to ministries and other

branches of government. Further, the implications of societal culture, values and broader social settings for the significance and level of trust in the relationship between the stakeholders involved in higher education and quality assurance cannot be ignored.

The framework illustrates that a higher degree of trust tends to be associated with a reduced demand for control and greater reliance on shared values, whereas lower trust begets control and monitoring. This assumption serves to link the overall level of trust between higher education institutions and external quality assurance agencies to how this may have implications for quality management models. On one hand, the empirical evidence generated through the data analysis broadly suggested consistency between the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective, the category of low trust relations in Gamson's theory and the application of a predominantly accountability-oriented quality management, as seen in HERQA's approach to private higher education institutions. On the other, it also indicated consistency between the normative-cognitive perspective, the category of high trust relations in Gamson's theory and the reliance on a mainly enhancement-oriented quality management, as illustrated in HERQA's approach to public institutions. The balance between the accountability and enhancement orientations and the overall nature of the relationship between the key stakeholders involved in the quality management processes could be determined by the specific contexts and characteristics of higher education systems. Nevertheless, it may be possible to conclude that quality management systems with strong trust relationships may tend to place more emphasis on supporting continuous quality improvements at higher education institutions. In contrast, those systems with weak trust relationships may primarily focus on ensuring accountability and compliance of higher education institutions to predefined standards.

Further, this study also uncovered some empirical evidence that seems to deviate from the key notions of the theoretical and analytical framework despite most findings corresponding to the framework. One example is the noticeable progress in quality improvement observed at Adams University, which is subjected to strict programme-level accreditation just like other private institutions. This may suggest that a compliance and accountability-oriented external regulation could be exploited internally in a manner that supports quality improvement if assisted by institutional commitment to safeguarding and upholding quality standards. Another such example is the findings that HERQA's reliance on subjecting public institutions to quality audits (more enhancement-oriented external quality evaluations) has had limited success in facilitating the overall improvements in their operations. As

evidenced by the data collected from the studied public institutions, this approach may fail to stimulate tangible advancements in quality improvement if the institutions lack genuine concern for developing internal quality assurance, dedicating the necessary resources to such efforts and utilising the information generated from such evaluations to inform improvement work. Moreover, the data indicated that internal quality assurance practices at a majority of the studied public and private institutions, except Admas University, tend to predominantly focus, to varying degrees, on inspecting academic units and monitoring the compliance of selected teaching and learning processes to academic regulations. This appears to be done seemingly regardless of whether the external quality evaluations that they are being subjected to by HERQA are quality audits (more enhancement-oriented) or accreditations (more accountability-oriented).

Another key insight from this study is that the institutional commitment to quality and quality assurance may determine the extent to which a higher education institution allocates its resources, however scarce they may be, to internal quality assurance activities and efforts. The empirical findings of the study further support the assertion that strong overall institutional capacity and resources may not guarantee that a higher education institution provides quality education, research and community services. Further, such capacity and resources may not necessarily imply that the internal quality assurance practices of the institution are well-developed, functional and integrated into everyday operations. Higher education institutions that possess genuine commitment to safeguarding and enhancing quality could be more likely to place the necessary resources at the disposal of their internal quality assurance units. As the empirical findings illustrated, higher education institutions with lower overall institutional capacity but better commitment to safeguarding quality can allocate more resources to quality assurance than those institutions that may possess superior overall institutional capacity but lack commitment to addressing quality concerns.

On balance, it would be logical to conclude that higher education systems wherein weak trust relations exist between higher education institutions and key external stakeholders may tend to focus on implementing quality management practices that are driven by ensuring accountability and compliance to the stated standards and expectations. In contrast, the presence of strong trust may contribute to orienting quality management procedures and processes towards stimulating quality enhancement. The theoretical and analytical framework also suggests that a quality assurance system based on trust, rather than driven by accountability purposes, may be more suitable for empowering and stimulating a sense of ownership regarding

quality at higher education institutions, instilling a quality culture and enhancing tangible improvements in their education, research and community service. A moderate level of trust between external quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions could provide an ideal environment for striking a balance between accountability and enhancement orientations in quality management. The findings of this study also demonstrated that the characteristics of both accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models and rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive instruments of trust building can be incorporated within a single higher education system (also noted in Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Further, quality assurance can be understood as an integral component of the broader accountability instruments applied in the governance of higher education.

Trust may play an important role in determining the nature of quality management models. The level of trust between stakeholders involved in quality assurance, such as quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, may have implications for whether the quality management model that higher education systems use tends to be driven by accountability and enhancement orientations.

Additionally, the evidence from Admas University supports the theoretical notion that recognises quality assurance as a tool that can help higher education institutions restore the public's trust in them. Evidence of improvements in the quality of operations and the reputation that higher education institutions gradually build for their dedication to quality seems to play a crucial role in helping such institutions gain the trust of internal and external stakeholders, such as quality assurance agencies and branches of government responsible for higher education. This study, however, concedes based on its findings that undergoing external and internal quality assurance alone may not be sufficient to guarantee trust in the quality standards of higher education institutions. The presence of external and internal quality assurance can neither fully address major quality concerns nor necessarily guarantee improvement in standards and quality. Moreover, its absence may not essentially imply the deterioration of the quality of education.

The study argues that suspicion and a lack of trust could hinder the development of an environment that is conducive to fostering the active engagement of stakeholders in enhancing quality in higher education. A higher education system that primarily employ normative-cognitive instruments of trust building and an enhancement-led quality management model may be, on relative terms, more convenient for robust stakeholder engagement and enhancing trust relationships than one with considerably rationalist-instrumentalist mechanisms of trust building

and an overly accountability-oriented quality management model. The active engagement of internal and external stakeholders in quality management procedures can be a key component of building trust in the internal and external practices of quality management. Further, trust issues could be partially linked to the size of higher education systems. As such, the literature suggests that building trust could be more challenging in large higher education systems (Stensaker & Gornitzka, 2009). This may imply that the trust problem in Ethiopian higher education can also be explained by its rapid expansion and the increasing number of higher education institutions in both the public and private sectors.

Understanding the differences in the underlying purposes, limitations and contextual relevance of the accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models could contribute to a better understanding of the quality assurance system employed by higher education systems found at various stages of development. As such, the quality concerns that exist in several developing countries, such as those in Africa, with relatively younger but rapidly expanding higher education systems, could be significantly different from those prevalent in the relatively mature higher education systems. Rapidly expanding higher education systems, particularly those with proliferating for-profit institutions, may be preoccupied with the pressing concerns associated with safeguarding minimum quality standards, ensuring effective regulation, safeguarding stakeholders from degree mills and rogue providers and guaranteeing a credible higher education system. Such systems that are undergoing massification may also face complex challenges related to unstable trust relations between stakeholders. In contrast, mature higher education systems may have more demands for facilitating continuous quality improvements, excelling in quality standards and global reputation, improving positions in international ranking and league tables, enhancing societal impact and social responsibility and supporting knowledge-based economies through quality research and innovation.

A growing awareness about these possible differences could lead to questioning the relevance and feasibility of pursuing or attempting to replicate an enhancement-led quality management model in emerging higher education systems where the demands for accountability and regulation of higher education institutions seem evidently more pressing. The quality management approaches used, for example, in the US and many European countries may have limited applicability for addressing the quality concerns pervasive in emerging and developing higher education systems. Therefore, it could be useful for developing countries to carefully evaluate the specific contextual needs and overall system capacities of their domestic higher

education systems and device a quality management system that is more relevant and effective in addressing the prevailing quality concerns. Further, the review of the literature, presented in Chapter Three, presents arguments that are critical of the international transferability of any national quality assurance framework to countries and higher education systems of dissimilar contexts (e.g. Van Damme, 2000).

Additionally, the theoretical and empirical insights gained from this study may contribute to further enriching the conceptualisation of quality in higher education. Existing conceptualisations, such as those suggested by Harvey and Green (1993) (e.g. quality as excellence, perfection or consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation), could be extended to incorporate trust as a fundamental notion that underpins the concerns for accountability to standards and improvements in quality. Trust is implicitly embedded in the quality and quality assurance in higher education. Redefining quality around trust and the issues of trust, thus, merits exploration. Such endeavour may expose the profound and, if not, inseparable conceptual, theoretical and empirical ties between trust and quality.

Weaknesses of the theoretical and analytical framework

The study identified certain weaknesses in its theoretical and analytical framework. As such, the framework may be considered relatively complex given its sizable components, which comprise the dimensions of trust, perspectives on trust building, selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust, and quality management models. As a result, it may lack simplicity to be applied in empirical studies that involve bulky data.

The framework also tends to be data-intensive such that carrying out an adequately thorough description and analysis of trust issues with an application of the theoretical and analytical framework may require gathering rich, comprehensive and high-quality data. For such reasons, the framework could be more suitable to qualitative investigations. Applying the framework in a quantitative analysis would require accurately operationalising each concept and variable and identifying proper indicators to enable precise measurements.

The selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust offered significantly less empirical insights than anticipated¹⁷¹. This was despite the crucial theoretical relevance of the insights from Gamson's theory in linking the overall level

¹⁷¹ Three main empirical insights gained from the application of the Gamson's theory are discussed in Chapter Nine, section 9.3.2.

of trust and influence strategies and shedding light on the institutional dynamics of interplay between the internal quality assurance units and academic units of higher education institutions. The limitations in the empirical insights obtained from the application of the selected notions from Gamson's theory were assessed to primarily be due to the inadequate depth in the research data and perceived theoretical overlap with the perspectives on trust building rather than the constraints of these theoretical insights. In consideration of this, the empirical analysis merged the low and high categories of trust relations and their corresponding influence strategies such as the use of constraints and persuasion, respectively, with the theoretical insights from the rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive mechanisms of trust building, respectively.

To a limited extent, there is an overlap of theoretical views between the perspectives on trust building and the selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust. On one hand, the central arguments in the rationalist-instrumentalist perspective on trust building seem to share similarities with those from Gamson's category of low trust relations. On the other, the notions of the normative-cognitive perspective on trust building appears to overlap with Gamson's category of high trust relations. This study, thus, merged these theoretical models while undertaking its empirical investigation in consideration of these broader similarities¹⁷². However, certain important differences between the perspectives on trust building and the selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust exist at abstract theoretical levels.

The theoretical and analytical framework employed in this study to explore trust and its implications for the nature of quality management models fails to explicitly and adequately capture the broader socio-cultural settings that may shape values on trust, quality and the overall context of the relationship between higher education institutions and external quality assurance agencies. This constitutes an important critique of the framework, since trust in any relationship exists within a broader social and cultural context. The evidence from the literature shows that history and culture may contribute to the development of an organisational environment that perpetuates trust or distrust (Morreale & Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). The authors further indicated that, for instance, largescale disruptions and transformations that took place in the political, economic and social institutions during the post-communist period created considerable levels of uncertainty and risk. This, in turn, contributed to the development of a culture of distrust in countries such as Poland and Russia. As such, the general patterns of interpersonal, intergroup, organisational

¹⁷² This is highlighted in Chapter Five, section 5.4.

and institutional relationships in society provide the broader context within which higher education institutions interact with quality assurance agencies and other external stakeholders. The trust between higher education institutions and the governments and external quality assurance agencies occurs within, and could be influenced by, the wider structures and forms of societal relationships. However, a generally trusting culture and pattern of social relationships in a specific country may not necessarily guarantee the existence of a relatively trusting relationship between higher education institutions and external stakeholders. Further, the possible nuances within a specific higher education system need to be acknowledged. Trust between higher education institutions and the government may not necessarily translate into trust between higher education institutions and other external stakeholders, such as a quality assurance agency. This requires the extent of trust in every relationship to be assessed within the context and institutional arrangement it occurs (Hardin, 2002).

The individual elements of the theoretical and analytical framework partially lack strong empirical and theoretical application in higher education research. Although the conceptual dimensions of trust and models of quality management have received relatively better attention in theoretical and empirical studies, the rationalist-instrumentalist and normative-cognitive perspectives on trust building have not been directly and sufficiently explored in previous studies. Most of the existing knowledge seems to have been developed in fields outside higher education. The existing knowledge on these perspectives within the field of higher education research seems underdeveloped. As Chapter Five illustrates, Stensaker and Gornitzka (2009) and Stensaker and Maassen (2015) have attempted to provide a brief discussion about these perspectives on trust building. The former presents these perspectives as broad theoretical lenses that can help better understand governance reforms in higher education, while the latter illustrates their significance for the examination of quality assurance in the context of the cross-border delivery of higher education. Additionally, no empirical study could be found within or outside higher education research that either explored or applied the insights adopted from Gamson's theory on power and trust. This lack of empirical application of certain elements of the theoretical and analytical framework has limited the valuable lessons this study could have learned from previous applications, which may have informed the rigour of the framework. Moreover, this study only utilised secondary literature on the theoretical insights of Gamson's theory on power and trust. The researcher was unable to access the original work. Given this, it is possible that some of the theoretical arguments may have been misinterpreted or detached from the original context.

Moreover, the description and assessment of the risks to quality and quality assurance involved in the relationship between higher education institutions and HERQA may not have adequately captured the full extent of risks and precisely portrayed the reality of the institutions. This could be explained by two factors. The first is the theoretical and hypothetical nature of the conceptualisation of risk that was adopted in this empirical investigation. The presence or absence of perceived risks, however, may not necessarily predict the behaviour of a trustee. It may not essentially mean that the trustee, in reality, will surely breach or honour the expectations of the trustor. It is in the consideration of such uncertainties that a trustor evaluates the level of perceived risks and decides either to voluntarily assume the risk and place its trust or chooses to avert the risk and refrain from entrusting its expectations to the trustee. Additionally, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to predict and identify the full extent of risks. The second factor is the lack of well-developed theoretical and empirical explorations of risk and its relationship with trust in the existing literature. In fact, the study identified scant attention given to risk in existing studies, which accounted for the reasons behind the under-exploration of the concept. This underscores the significance of further developing the conceptualisation of risk to enable a more rigorous empirical investigation of the uncertainties associated with quality and quality assurance. Despite the theoretical conceptualisation of risk, this study concedes that it may be impractical, unreliable and risky to rely solely on higher education institutions to safeguard the quality of their education, research and community services. Interventions in the form of external supervision and regulation by the government and quality assurance agencies becomes necessary and, to an extent, unavoidable.

The study acknowledges that issues of relevance and suitability could be raised regarding the dimensions used for conceptualising trust in the present inquiry, as most of the frameworks available in the literature were developed from the 1970s to the 1990s. Therefore, this study reconsidered the suitability of each dimension, the terms used to refer to some of these dimensions and further adopted risk as a separate dimension. This was done to be able to apply such relatively older dimensions in a contemporary empirical exploration of the extent to which a quality assurance agency may trust higher education institutions in relation to quality and quality assurance in higher education. Further revision and updating of these conceptual dimensions could ensure their continued relevance for future theoretical and empirical studies of trust.

Another issue with the conceptual dimensions of trust, besides the need to update them, could be the challenges involved with reconfiguring them to fit the context of

higher education. Although the dimensions of trust have been widely applied in other disciplines, there has been minimal applications of them in theoretical and empirical studies within the field of higher education (Pope, 2004). This creates some challenges for contextualising and operationalising the dimensions of trust in a manner that is suitable for investigating issues in higher education, such as quality assurance.

The existing studies on the concept of trust indicate the lack of conceptual clarity due to the elusive nature of the concept and existence of several conceptualisations and overlapping categorisations. The theoretical and empirical analysis presented in this study acknowledges these limitations.

10.2 Methodological implications

The adoption of interpretivism as a guiding research paradigm, the application of multiple qualitative case studies and the implementation of a thematic analysis supported the empirical investigation of the data and answering of the research questions posed at the outset. This enabled the investigation to accommodate the conceptual, theoretical and empirical contexts of the study. Drawing on an inductive mode of reasoning was crucial for deriving broader patterns and generalisations regarding the trust between HERQA and higher education institutions and its possible implications for the nature of quality management models by aggregating the insights generated from the empirical analysis of individual cases. The thematic analysis employed in this study showed that the main themes from the theoretical and analytical framework and the sub-themes were identified inductively from the data.

The empirical evidence from this study acknowledged the value of the interpretivism paradigm for recognising, identifying and explaining the diversity of the views regarding trust and quality assurance across various groups of respondents, such as those selected from higher education institutions, HERQA, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and the selected researchers. The interpretivism paradigm was found to have a relatively better capacity for guiding studies such as this, which deal with concepts, such as trust and quality, whose meaning is largely contested and lacks consensus. The paradigm assisted in capturing such aspects.

The study found that working with multiple and diverse cases increased the scope of the empirical and theoretical insights. It allowed the identification of generic trends and nuances and exceptions at the institutional level. The inclusion of

exceptional or deviant cases, such as Admas University, allowed the examination and questioning of the generic trends and provided useful theoretical insights. These highlight the significance that attributes, such as having intrinsic commitment to safeguarding quality, taking quality assurance seriously, allocating the available resources to assure and enhance quality and possessing dedication to open and honest reporting, have for gaining the trust of quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders. Such insights gained from the study underscore the theoretical and empirical significance of selecting a diverse sample and the rational (and theoretical) inclusion of deviant cases. Additionally, the purposive selection of respondents from the various academic units of the studied institutions provided a sample that more accurately captured the institutional and disciplinary diversity present in Ethiopian higher education.

The use of the supplementary data gathered from non-academic outlets, such as media reports, the official social media accounts of HERQA, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MOSHE) and the studied higher education institutions, enriched the empirical findings and provided supportive evidence to the data analysis. This also allowed to further improve the referential adequacy and data triangulation of the study, thereby contributing to the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Moreover, the use of such data informed the theoretical and empirical investigation and enabled the study to stay updated with the relatively rapid developments occurring in the research context and ensure continued contextual relevance.

The experience from this study may also hint at the value of gathering rich longitudinal data for undertaking a deeper and concrete analysis of trust development and relationships over a given period. However, this type of data and longitudinal methods have not been tested extensively in empirical studies (Bijlsma & Koopman, 2003). This criticism also applies to the present study.

Another implication of the data analysis and interpretation of the findings could be the recognition of the role that placing balanced emphasis on empirical evidence that supports and contradicts the theoretical and analytical framework has for undertaking a relatively balanced and comprehensive investigation. This was also found to help reduce skewed, biased and one-sided discussions, which may fail to capture the diversity of the views found in the literature and research data, thereby contributing to improving the credibility and confirmability of the study.

The combined application of the dimensions of trust, the perspectives on trust building, the selected insights from Gamson's theory on power and trust and the quality management models served the purpose of theoretical triangulation.

However, studies integrating various theoretical and analytical models into a unified framework need to consider the consistency, linkage and complexity of perspectives and their relevance to guiding the investigation of the research questions.

Moreover, exhaustively utilising both local and international literature could help locate a worthy research problem, identify solid academic, theoretical and empirical gaps and evaluate the insights generated from the data analysis in relation to the findings from previous studies.

10.3 Implications for policy and practice

The study concludes, as mentioned previously, that balancing the accountability and enhancement purposes in quality management could be substantially beneficial to ensuring compliance to the stated quality standards, safeguarding the interests of stakeholders and facilitating continuous quality improvements. This is crucial because relying predominantly on either accountability-oriented or enhancement-led quality management models can be less comprehensive and advantageous in terms of adequately responding to both internal and external interests (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Newton, 2002; Rippin et al., 1994; Vroeiijstijn, 1995). Both external and internal quality monitoring mechanisms are needed for comprehensive development in the quality of higher education in Ethiopia. Accordingly, transforming the current substantially accountability-oriented external and internal quality assurance practices and incorporating quality enhancement orientations may require undertaking various changes.

The section below briefly highlights the steps that could be taken to reform the current quality management system implemented at the system and institutional levels. The discussion may also offer insights into the issues that higher education systems may need to consider to succeed in transforming a primarily accountability-oriented quality management system to one that balances accountability and enhancement orientations.

Reforming and building the capacity of HERQA. Reforming the organisational, managerial and functional aspects of HERQA could be made a priority. This is crucial, since the findings of the study suggested that HERQA, in its current state, falls short of delivering on the underlying expectations of the Ministry of Education formulated upon the establishment of the agency. First, HERQA has not become an agency with the adequate organisational, professional, operational and technological capacity required for carrying out its mandates to safeguard quality in

a rapidly expanding higher education system. In fact, the operations of the agency have been severely constrained by an acute shortage of trained and competent human resources, which is partly caused by the high turnover and overall low attractiveness of its positions, and a lack of support from the government. Hence, the gaps in its own capacity that the Ministry had hoped to fill by establishing HERQA remain unaddressed. In fact, the review of documents showed that the capacity problems of the agency date back as early as 2006. Such reports from HERQA's formative years seem to echo the current capacity constraints that are facing the agency. Second, HERQA, after more than 15 years in operation, has still not attained the autonomy stipulated in the higher education proclamation. The Ministry of Education has failed to avoid a conflict of interest, since it still maintains a considerable influence over the governance and operations of the agency. Hence, it can be argued that the Ministry is still assessing its own activities through an agency that it funds and holds accountable¹⁷³. The findings of the study further uncovered evidence that showed that the Ministry interferes with and, at times, overrules HERQA's decisions on accreditation evaluations and unannounced inspections. Third, HERQA has also not been able to guarantee the effective regulation, control and support of private higher education institutions operating in the country. Today, widespread deception, violations of regulations for quality and engagement in illegal and unethical activities are pervasive at private higher education institutions, which the agency can neither effectively prevent nor control.

As a result, emphasis should be placed on addressing the capacity and autonomy challenges of HERQA (Henson et al., 2006; Salmi et al., 2017). This could significantly empower the agency's operations, enable it to put an end to the dichotomy of the external quality assurance requirements applicable for public and private higher education institutions and comprehensively ensure quality standards across the higher education sector. The task of reforming HERQA could consider various useful suggestions forwarded in the report of the agency's review by a panel of international experts (Henson et al., 2016), the education roadmap study, the proposal submitted to the Ministry by HERQA itself to revise its organisation and operations and several academic research works. Implementing such a reform would, however, require genuine commitment and political will from the government and

¹⁷³ The interviews with the selected researchers further called for the Ministry to consider ceasing fully administering the exit examinations given to the graduates from public institutions in order to enable a credible assessment of the quality of student learning. These respondents urged the Ministry to learn from the widespread dissatisfactions with the Centre of Competence (COC) examinations that it has been administering for the graduates from private institutions and the TVET graduates of public institutions.

Ministry of Education. The human, financial and technological resources of the agency need to be strengthened, with a particular emphasis on building the capacity of the human resources and ensuring the institutional autonomy of the agency. This is critical for improving the performance of HERQA, restoring its credibility and increasing the support it could provide to the development of internal quality assurance practices at higher education institutions. Revising the pay package of the positions at HERQA could raise the attractiveness of the prospect of working at the agency and reduce the vulnerability of its experts to corruption.

The evidence from this study illustrated the urgent need to provide capacity-building programmes for the quality audit and accreditation officers of HERQA to enhance their expertise, competence and professionalism. There is also a severe shortage of trained, qualified and committed quality assurance staff at higher education institutions. Capacity-building for staff members engaged in quality assurance activities represents a useful area of intervention for stimulating external and internal quality assurance and enhancement in Ethiopian higher education. Platforms for sharing experiences and continuous trainings are needed. Overall, the agency needs to be empowered and capacitated to a level that would allow it to effectively discharge its responsibilities for accrediting and auditing the vast number of public and private higher education institutions of the country and their study programmes. HERQA also needs leaders who are knowledgeable, competent and free from political affiliation and recruited through open competition based on merit rather than being directly appointed by the Ministry. This is crucial since the study uncovered dissatisfaction among HERQA's audit and accreditation experts over instances where certain leaders of the agency have allegedly asked them to be lenient during accreditation evaluations for private institutions owned by their personal acquaintances and, at times, have bypassed the decisions of the evaluation experts and granted permits to institutions.

In addition to the merit-based recruitment, requiring those appointed to leadership and management positions to undergo professional training could help improve the quality of the leadership and management of HERQA and higher education institutions. Such training could also help deepen the understanding of those in leadership positions about the peculiar organisational characteristics of higher education institutions and equip them with the tools needed for effectively carrying out strategic and operations management.

Quality control and system clean-up ahead of quality enhancement. Another important suggestion would be to introduce a period of strict and thorough inspection to help restore confidence in the standard and wellbeing of higher education institutions.

When a higher education system is in a poor state of quality and lacks credibility, its quality management system may tend to focus on monitoring quality standards than supporting enhancement. Sanitising the system to remove institutions and practices that are responsible for exacerbating quality problems is thus vital for restoring credibility and order before working on quality improvement. As such, it would seem necessary to first conduct a thorough inspection of the private sector to identify quality institutions, issue a probation period for those that exhibit critical quality problems to improve the standards of their operations and abolish those institutions who are found to be fraudulent. More effective regulation and monitoring mechanisms are needed to contain and, eventually, deter the currently widespread deception, dishonest reporting and violations of regulations. This would require the introduction of strict requirements and procedures for private institutions intending to enter the higher education sector. This can be considered as the first stage of filtering out substandard and unethical institutions. Similar inspections could thus be gradually extended to public institutions. A thorough scrutiny of both public and private could filter out institutions and programmes that fail to conform to the quality standards, regulations and principles required for responsible operation. Going through such phases of quality control, preferably lasting one to three years, would be necessary to clamp down on substandard institutions, although this may not be the best or sustainable approach in the long run.

At the end of such periods of thorough scrutiny and a comprehensive overhaul, the higher education landscape would be expected to put an end to the current cat and mouse approach. The attention can thus be shifted to stimulating tangible and continuous quality enhancement with increased reliance on internal mechanisms of quality assurance. This could lead to restoring the credibility of the higher education system, which could facilitate the development of an environment that is conducive for implementing a trust-based quality enhancement approach and progressively balancing accountability and quality enhancement. These reforms could reduce HERQA's workload and free up the resources that are currently allocated to accrediting study programmes and conducting surprise inspections at private institutions. This could also enable HERQA to re-engage with public institutions. Implementing such measures would, however, require empowering HERQA and granting it autonomy and support from the Ministry of Education.

Abolishing dichotomous accreditation requirements. Progress towards balancing accountability and enhancement purposes in quality management requires abolishing the double standard in HERQA's external regulation of public and private institutions and ensuring the development of a fair, consistent and unified quality

assurance system. The differential approach should be abandoned, since both sectors serve the same country and contribute to the national labour market. Such recommendations are consistent with previous studies. These have criticised the current quality assurance system for its dichotomous approach to subjecting public and private higher education institutions to dissimilar requirements that hold private higher education institutions to strict regulation, while their public counterparts enjoy a softer approach (e.g. Adamu & Addamu, 2012; Akalu, 2014; Geda, 2014; Girma, 2014; Henson et al., 2016; Kahsay, 2012; Lodesso, 2012; Tamrat, 2011; Woldetinsae, 2009). The government and Ministry of Education must not protect public universities from being accredited in the same way as private institutions. It would be important to recognise that neither is the education provided at private institutions necessarily of low quality nor is the education and training delivered by public universities essentially of high quality. Not all public institutions can be trusted to responsibly safeguard the quality of their core activities. Generalisations must be avoided, as there are institutions of high and low quality in both sectors.

Currently, such discriminatory practices have deprived public institutions of the valuable experience of striving to meet minimum quality requirements and the motivation to gradually strengthen their overall institutional capacity for addressing quality problems. As such, the respondents from HERQA admitted to finding programmes at public institutions, mostly in the health sciences, engineering and technology fields, that do not meet minimum quality standards set for academic staff, laboratories, libraries and other essential facilities and that would have been shut down if they were offered at private institutions. As highlighted previously, abolishing the double standard and subjecting public institutions to strict accreditation requires the political will of the government. This can be attributed to the growing politicisation of higher education and HERQA's commitment to fully and consistently implementing the mandates entrusted to it by the higher education proclamation for both the public and private higher education sector. The Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions' Association could play a more active role in advocating for such changes.

Considering complementary accountability instruments. A higher education system, such as Ethiopia's, that seeks to transform its quality management model from a predominantly accountability-oriented model to one that strikes a balance with an enhancement-led orientation could consider supporting such changes in quality assurance using complementary accountability instruments in other aspects of the governance and steering of higher education, such as finances and societal engagement. This entails perceiving quality assurance as an integral component of

the broader accountability mechanisms that are applied in higher education (Massy, 2011; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011a, 2011b). The use of such complementary accountability instruments could assist in ensuring that the demands for the internal and external accountability of institutions would not be compromised despite moving in the direction of a more trust-based quality management. A good example for this could be Finland's higher education system, which follows an enhancement-led approach in quality management that relies on highly trust-based institutional quality audits in tandem with one of the most stringent performance-based funding models in the world (Hansen et al., 2019). There is potential for learning from such experiences despite the obvious contextual differences. Additionally, previous studies such as those conducted by Danø and Stensaker (2007) also suggest that accreditation can be integrated in an external quality assurance system alongside other quality improvement procedures in order to prevent the accountability and control orientation from overrunning the system and to increase the balance with quality enhancement.

Supporting the development of quality culture. Another decisive issue in balancing accountability and enhancement in quality management could be the maturity of higher education institutions and the development of a quality culture. The literature indicates that the organisational culture shapes the development of values that may promote varying degrees of trust and suspicion, which, in turn, can affect motivation and behaviour (Bess & Dee, 2008; Mayer et al., 1995; Morreale & Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). Initiating self-regulation and decentralisation as strategies of quality improvement would be feasible if the higher education institutions and their academic communities have developed an institutional culture based on quality and a sense of responsibility at all levels (Hölttä, 1995; Kells, 1992). Higher education institutions operating responsibly independently with significantly less stringent external quality regulation could be a feature of higher education systems that have experienced and matured institutions. This may not be the case for rapidly expanding higher education systems, such as Ethiopia's, that are undergoing rapid massification. Such systems would then rely on external regulation given the limited maturity of their higher education institutions. The safeguarding of the quality of higher education and commitment to quality assurance need to become a part of the culture ingrained in the organisational fabric of higher education institutions. Till this occurs, it would be necessary to employ accountability instruments to ensure responsible operation, safeguard the interests of internal and external stakeholders and enforce adherence to the regulations and principles of lawful operation. Further, the rapid expansion of higher education in both the public and private sectors of

Ethiopia is likely to continue posing challenges for HERQA regarding ensuring effective control and assuring the quality of education.

Given such trajectories, the quality assurance strategy should focus on creating commitment and promoting a solid sense of ownership with respect to quality assurance at higher education institutions rather than relying on external inspection and control. The gradual development of the quality culture and accountability of stakeholders can help reduce the scale of deception and violations of regulations. Hence, this may free up a considerable proportion of HERQA's resources, which are currently committed to controlling private higher education institutions. A quality culture can also enable the development of procedures and processes that support tangible and continuous quality enhancement at higher education institutions. Reactivating and stimulating internal quality assurance units to render them fully functional instead of being symbolic structures with little tangible engagement in quality assurance could facilitate the development of institutional ownership towards quality assurance processes. It is further noted that the development of quality culture at institutions may be strongly linked to how the broad external quality assurance system functions (Danø & Stensaker, 2007). Additionally, the practice of rewarding and granting recognition or sanctioning institutions based on their performance in quality assurance can create incentives for cultural transformation within institutions.

Linking quality evaluations to enhancement work. There is a need to strengthen the practice of utilising the valuable information generated from quality assessments to inform decision-making and improvements in core operations, which could assist in incorporating components of quality enhancement in the current quality assurance system. It would be vital to establish more visible and tangible links between quality assessments and the institutional efforts aimed at bringing about improvements. HERQA needs to start implementing real accreditation and create links with reaccreditation and quality audit evaluations. It also needs to commit more resources to following up, providing training and capacity-building, and supporting enhancement efforts at institutions, as quality enhancement primarily takes places at the institutional level. Further, the responsibility for accessing educational inputs and processes could be, in the long term, delegated to internal quality assurance units at institutions. This would allow HERQA's external quality evaluations to begin focusing more on the educational outputs and the quality of student learning. The desired improvements in quality standards may not be achieved by limiting quality assurance to inputs and processes of teaching and learning.

Enhancing stakeholder engagement. Strengthening the engagement of professional associations and other stakeholders in quality assurance processes can further contribute to capacity development at the national level for supporting progress toward quality enhancement. HERQA needs to work more closely with stakeholders within higher education institutions and external stakeholders. Otherwise, the complex demands for accountability and improvement in quality cannot be guaranteed through the efforts of HERQA alone. The responsibilities for quality assurance need to be distributed among higher education institutions, associations of higher education institutions, professional associations and other stakeholders. More opportunities need to be created for non-governmental bodies to actively engage in quality assurance. The establishment of additional quality assurance bodies, for instance, by private entities, professional associations and higher education institutions that HERQA could accredit or monitor could be the way forward. Promoting partnerships between the public and private sectors could further facilitate the pooling of resources.

Revising quality assurance procedures. Revising and updating quality assurance objectives, strategies, methodology and procedures could be useful. This is important because the external quality assurance procedures that have been in use since the establishment of HERQA in 2003 and requirements for institutional quality assurance introduced in 2009 have fundamentally remained the same. This is the case despite the frequent dissatisfaction with the falling quality standards and the criticism over the limited effectiveness of the existing procedures. The vastly desired move in the direction of quality enhancement cannot be realised unless the current strategies and procedures are reconsidered. This would be necessary, as the higher education landscape, complexity of quality challenges and interaction between institutions and stakeholders have noticeably evolved since the existing quality assurance procedures were developed. HERQA and the Ministry of Education must consider periodically reviewing external and internal quality assurance procedures and devising consecutive cycles that include evolving and gradually progressive targets and expectations. This has been a common practice in other countries around the world, such as Finland and Scotland. In this regard, HERQA, through due dialogue with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders, could, for example, consider implementing various cycles or rounds of evaluation to specifically focus on: quality control and abolish substandard and fraudulent institutions and programmes, accreditations and quality audits with an emphasis on evaluating the development of internal quality assurance systems, evaluations of the links between quality assessments and improvement activities, reviews of how quality assurance

supports core institutional operations, assessments of educational outputs, assessments of the impact of quality assurance on student learning and societal impact and various other evolving targets. It may also be useful to revise the feasibility of the assessment criteria, standards and minimum quality requirements in place to further reduce the prevalence of deception and violations of regulations.

Transformations in the broader cultural values of society. The empirical findings of the study hinted that the development of quality culture at higher education institutions could be facilitated by changes in societal culture and values in favour of quality. These arguments recognise the implications of the broader social and cultural settings for trust between higher education institutions and the governments and quality assurance agencies. A previous study concluded that the socio-cultural context of Ethiopia tends to attach more value to degrees, diplomas and certificates over the quality of student learning, merit and professional competence (Kahsay, 2012, pp. 239-241). This suggests that student learning may be far from being genuinely valued. Further, in her anecdotal observations of the Ethiopian society, Yitbarek (2007) pointed to a prevalent culture of mutual distrust, suspicion and lack of openness in communication, which was argued to inhibit cooperation, reciprocity and honesty between individuals and organisations. Such findings underscore the significance of changes in the values with respect to trust and quality for supporting transformations in quality management and the landscape of relationship between HERQA and higher education institutions in a way that could balance accountability and enhancement orientations. It could also help address fundamental attitude problems related to trust and quality.

In general, the suggestions discussed above may offer insights for policy-makers into what is required to transform the current compliance and accountability-orientated quality assurance model and integrate components of an enhancement-led approach. These suggestions could further contribute to realising the higher education sector's 10-year plan (2020-2029), which identifies the task of assuring the relevance and quality of higher education as one of its eleven major goals (MOSHE, 2020).

Significance for the recent developments in Ethiopian higher education

This section attempts to reflect on the significance of the study for the recent developments that have occurred in Ethiopian higher education after the data collection was conducted in September-October 2018. Some of the major recent developments include the creation of a separate Ministry of Science and Higher

Education (MOSHE) by the restructuring of the Ministry of Education, the finalisation of the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) study that seeks to reform the education sector and a new higher education proclamation (1152/2019) coming into force.

The creation of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, that has been given the responsibility to lead higher education and TVET, could be considered a step in the right direction¹⁷⁴. This can enable the development of higher education to receive greater attention and resources. It also creates opportunities to address problems in quality and quality assurance in cooperation with HERQA.

This study provides theoretical and empirical support for certain policy recommendations put forth in the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (2018-30) study. These include the need to ensure the autonomy of HERQA, abolish dichotomy in accreditation requirements, strengthen the national capacity to address quality problems and introduce quality enhancement programmes (Ministry of Education & Education Strategy Centre, 2018). This study also supports the recent decision of the Ministry to no longer construct new public universities and, instead, focus on strengthening the existing ones.

However, the empirical findings of this study offer insights that question and require the relevance and feasibility of some of the recommendations from the roadmap study to be reconsidered. Some examples have been highlighted as follows. The first such recommendation is for higher education institutions to separate quality assurance and quality enhancement processes and create separate units for each with different lines of accountability¹⁷⁵ (Ministry of Education & Education Strategy Centre, 2018, p. 55). This could likely lead to unnecessary bureaucratisation and the further fragmentation of quality management processes and activities. Such suggestions seem to emanate from the lack of adequate understanding regarding what quality enhancement constitutes and perceiving it as an alien procedure. It must be noted that quality enhancement mainly occurs when the valuable information and insights generated by quality evaluations are utilised by higher education institutions to reinforce their strengths, share good practices, address areas that need development, inform their academic and managerial activities and stimulate continuous processes for improving the standards of their core activities. As the

¹⁷⁴ As a result, the suggestions forwarded in this study for the Ministry of Education regarding the issues of policy and practice must be considered to be directed to the new Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

¹⁷⁵ This pertains to the recommendation of the education roadmap study that quality assurance offices should be made accountable to the presidents of universities, whereas quality enhancement offices should be under the guidance of vice presidents who oversee the academic affairs.

discussion in Chapter Three highlights, treating quality assurance and quality enhancement as distinct processes resembles old-fashioned notions. Instead, the two processes must be viewed as being intricately linked.

The second such recommendation is the suggestion that existing universities should open satellite campuses to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio to 22 per cent by 2025 (Ministry of Education & Education Strategy Centre, 2018, p. 50). This could worsen the quality problem, since satellite and branch campuses require the same, or higher, level of physical facilities and infrastructure as establishing a new university. Instead, strengthening existing universities and enhancing their intake capacity within the premises they currently operate could be a better solution.

The third such recommendation is to expand distance education as a way of expanding access to higher education (Ministry of Education & Education Strategy Centre, 2018, p. 50). This, however, seems to neglect the complex challenges that distance education has posed for the quality of education, which has caused the Ministry to frequently issue corrective measures in the past¹⁷⁶. This suggests that providing distance education may not be a viable strategy for increasing the enrolment in higher education that meets national and international quality standards. Instead, programmes delivered through evening and weekend classes could be relatively better options.

The fourth recommendation that merits reconsideration is that of the Ministry's proposal to categorise public institutions into 'research universities, applied universities, general [comprehensive] universities and specialised higher education institutions' ("Ethiopia Names Eight Universities Centres of Excellence in Research," 2020; Kassahun, 2020; "Ministry Classifies Universities According to Excellence," 2020). Despite being a commendable effort to introduce differentiation based on mission and excellence, this measure appears to be hurried and seems to lack clarity regarding its strategic objectives and a careful consideration of the comparative advantages and infrastructural capacities of institutions for providing quality education and research in their assigned areas of excellence¹⁷⁷. The desired outcomes of the classification could be limited to little more than a mere nominal differentiation unless such issues are addressed based on reliable data, clear policies and discussions with the relevant stakeholders. The proposed differentiation also

¹⁷⁶ A brief discussion about the quality issues related to distance education can be found in Chapter Nine, section 9.1.3.

¹⁷⁷ In October 2020, the Ministry officially announced a slightly modified categorisation that classified public universities into, namely 'research', 'comprehensive,' 'applied science,' 'science and technology,' and 'technical [TVET]' (Aderaw, 2020b).

excludes private higher education institutions seemingly as an extension of the pervasive unequal treatment of public and private sectors in Ethiopian higher education system.

Moreover, the new higher education proclamation (1152/2019) contains certain positive regulations despite stipulating considerably fewer changes than anticipated. An example of such changes would be the introductory statement of Article 87 (FDRE, 2019), which constitutes a new provision that grants power to HERQA to ensure its ‘autonomy, be neutral and have adequate human power’. The proclamation, however, does not clearly state that HERQA should be independent of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. In fact, the new proclamation retains the dichotomous accreditation requirements. Provisions that clearly require private institutions to undergo accreditation and reaccreditation are retained from the previous proclamations, whereas no new provision is made explicitly pertaining to subjecting public institutions to similar strict accreditation requirements. As such, the proclamation seems to have brought inadequate changes to ensure the organisational, managerial and operational autonomy of HERQA and has failed to address the public-private dichotomy in accreditations. This could be considered indicative of the hesitation and lack of political will of the government to ensure the autonomy of HERQA and support the application of uniform accreditation requirements for both the public and private sectors.

Additionally, the recent inauguration of HERQA’s digitised information management and tracing system could be seen as a step in the right direction. The system is developed to process applications for accreditations efficiently and on time, monitor and follow up on whether private institutions are operating in adherence to accreditation and reaccreditation permits and gather up-to-date and reliable information from private institutions for effective decision-making (EPA, 2020a; HERQA, 2020f, 2020g, 2020h, 2020i). Modernising the operations of HERQA, for instance, through digitisation could help better arrest deception and unethical practices.

10.4 Limitations

This study is an exploratory study pioneering investigations into a fresh direction that has so far been largely unexplored. Thus, the investigation has made efforts to provide a detailed analysis of the trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions and its implications for the nature of quality management

models. However, the study concedes that the data analysis could have been more thorough. The number of studied higher education institutions and the comprehensive nature of the components of the analytical and theoretical framework have focused on attempting to depict the broader picture of the trust relations between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions. These limitations could be considered inherently associated with the methodological choice of a multiple case study and nature of the theoretical and analytical framework. The literature of research methodology suggests that, in contrast to a single case study, the depth of an empirical analysis may decrease as the number of cases employed in a study increases (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gerring, 2007).

The study investigated the trust and its implication in quality management models mainly from the perspective of the quality assurance agency, and, therefore, only to a limited extent addressed the issue from the perspective of higher education institutions. It lacks a balanced analysis of trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions.

Moreover, the amount and quality of data collected from Medco Bio-Medical College through interviews and document reviews was significantly lower than data gathered from the other studied higher education institutions. The researcher encountered an attitude of suspicion and hesitation from the college when asked to provide more information. This may have been associated with the fact that the institution is a private entity, which often tend to be secretive regarding their operations. Another reason behind the uneasiness of the college could be linked to the recent deterioration of its relationship with HERQA and the subsequent closure of some of its programmes in 2016. This may have resulted in a general sense of uneasiness to relinquish key documents that may contain information capable of further tarnishing the image of the college. Despite the challenge, the researcher considered such institutional behaviour, however constraining it was for the depth of the data analysis, to be relevant to the nature of the inquiry and essence of the research questions. Such problems of openness and the overall problematic relationship the college has with HERQA were believed to enrich the diversity of the empirical evidence. The researcher made efforts to exhaustively utilise the data collected from the interviews with the respondents from the college and the institutional quality audit report of the college obtained from HERQA to compensate for the unavailability of additional documents to support the data analysis pertaining to Medco Bio-Medical College.

As in many qualitative studies, the researcher concedes that the selection of the studied higher education institutions, the translation of the interview transcripts

from Amharic to English and the data analysis and presentation and interpretations of the findings were not entirely free from the influence of his personal perspective, understanding and preconceived notions. This, however, must be understood within the context that the study was guided by an interpretivism research paradigm that, as indicated in Chapter Seven, acknowledges that complete objectivity may not be possible. The paradigm rather embraces a transactional and subjectivist epistemological assumption that considers research an interactive process between the researcher and phenomenon under investigation and is shaped by the individual characteristics and backgrounds of the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Davies & Fisher, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Flick, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The study also concedes that trust, despite being a fundamental component, may not be the only factor that shapes the nature of quality management models. The investigation, however, did not address other underlying broader contextual factors within the settings of higher education systems that may determine the characteristics of quality management models.

The transferability of the empirical insights gained from this study could be contextually bounded despite the relatively broader relevance of its theoretical implications. The findings of the study could be more visibly relevant to higher education systems that have such as a statutory quality assurance agency as the main actor in the quality assurance processes, traditions of being mostly government-led systems, weak societal and institutional culture that truly values trust and quality, dissimilar attitudes and approaches to public and private higher education institutions, prevalent trust problems and less effectively regulated proliferation of for-profit institutions.

This study can be considered pioneering, as it links the investigation of trust, quality management and the relationship between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. Given this, the study may lack conceptual, theoretical and analytical maturity due to the scarcity of previous studies that have addressed these issues more directly. Nevertheless, it could have the potential to initiate more discussion and research on these issues.

10.5 Implications for further research

Studies of the implications that the external socio-cultural environment may have for trust and quality assurance in higher education could be useful. Such studies could help enhance the understanding of the role that the broader socio-cultural

settings play for the trust between higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders.

The influence of governmental pressure and politics on the relationship between external quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions and the subsequent nature of the quality management models in use could be addressed by further investigations. Such studies could offer insights into how issues of politics and political interests can be integrated into the discussions of trust and quality assurance in higher education.

Future studies could also address the issues of trust relations and quality management from the perspective of higher education institutions. This could help address the limited insights gained from this study, which approached the investigation of trust and quality management mainly from the perspective of a quality assurance agency.

A more theoretically and empirically elaborated conceptualisation of risk can support the development of higher education research involving trust issues. Future research can build on the way this study has conceptualised risk in the context of exploring the trust between a quality assurance agency and higher education institutions. This conceptualisation could be seen as an initial attempt, since a majority of the previous studies have not included the element of risk as a dimension when conceptualising and empirically examining trust.

The theoretical and analytical framework constructed and applied in this study was employed to analyse a quality assurance system that, as the empirical findings suggested, tends to be predominantly accountability-oriented. Hence, further research could employ the framework for investigating and analysing higher education systems with a principally enhancement-led quality management model. This could contribute to a comprehensive empirical application of the theoretical and analytical framework and an exploration of the relative strengths and shortcomings of the framework's descriptive, analytical and predictive capacities. Additionally, investigating the trust between quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions in the context of a relatively enhancement-oriented quality management system could generate additional theoretical and empirical insights. Comparative studies could also be useful in this regard.

This study applied the theoretical and analytical framework in the context of a higher education system with a single statutory quality assurance agency that is funded, accountable to and managed by the Ministry of Education. Thus, the framework could also be explored in higher education systems that have more than one quality assurance agency. Further, it could be applied in contexts where non-

statutory quality assurance agencies, such as quality assurance agencies that have been established by private entities and associations of higher education institutions or those initiated by professional bodies, constitute the major actors in external quality assurance evaluations. In addition, the framework could also be employed to investigate systems where the operation of quality assurance agencies is organisationally, administratively and financially more independent from government and other external stakeholders. Moreover, the theoretical and analytical framework could also be applied and tested in contexts where quality assurance agencies employ strict approach towards public higher education institutions but have a tendency of implementing a more relaxed evaluation for private higher education institutions based on having relatively stronger trust in them. Such studies could offer diverse and comprehensive insights.

Research into the differences among the purposes, advantages and concerns of the accountability-oriented and enhancement-led quality management models can contribute to better understanding the nature of the quality management models that could be more suitable for higher education systems at various stages of development. The literature on quality assurance in higher education could benefit from further theoretical and empirical studies of the dynamics between accountability and enhancement orientations within the quality management system. This may help expand the knowledge on how to strike a balance between these orientations.

In light of the mixed evidence obtained from the previous studies, more investigation is needed to thoroughly investigate the exact nature and magnitude of the impacts that quality assurance has had at various levels. More studies are needed to investigate the impacts that the practices of employing dissimilar external quality assurance requirements for different types of higher education institutions may have on quality standards of institutions. Such studies could also examine the impacts that these practices have on restoring the public's trust in higher education institutions. This could help clarify the inconclusive evidence obtained in this study.

The argument found in the literature that suggests that quality assurance can serve to restore public trust in higher education and higher education institutions seems to require more empirical evidence and testing. Further, the empirical findings that seemingly deviated from the basic notions of the theoretical and analytical framework, as highlighted in section 10.1, may provoke a broader discussion and provide an input for future research.

Finally, the theoretical and empirical research involving the concept of trust and the issues related to trust in higher education is still at an early stage. The discussion

of trust is not well-developed in the higher education literature (Pope, 2004). As highlighted in Chapter Four, the investigation of the trust issues that exist in quality and quality assurance is gradually emerging. A further examination of trust in higher education could hence help reduce this gap and may generate useful insights into the dynamics of the relationships that exist between the various internal stakeholders within higher education institutions and between higher education institutions and external stakeholders. Drawing on the inter-disciplinary nature of higher education and adopting relevant theories, models and perspectives from other disciplines could contribute to addressing the lack of theoretical models that can adequately and comprehensively analyse issues related to trust within higher education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Diverse conceptions of trust

Author	Main themes in defining trust	Common aspects
Cook & Wall (1980)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - faith in intentions - confidence in actions 	
Gabarro (1987)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - integrity, honesty - openness - motive, commitment, agenda, posture - consistency of behaviour - discretion 	
Luhmann (1988)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - familiarity - confidence - risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - relational aspect - risk/vulnerability, - unpredictability/uncertainty - willingness to assume risk
Swan et al. (1988)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - honesty - dependability - competent - likeability - customer oriented 	
Tway (1994)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - capacity for trusting - perception of competence - perception of intentions 	
Mayer et al. (1995)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - propensity to trust (willingness, goodwill) - ability, benevolence, integrity 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vulnerability (irrespective of the capacity and level of control and monitoring) - good faith - honesty - honouring of commitment - refrain from taking excessive advantage - interdependence - risk and uncertainty - vulnerability - honest dealing - not taking advantages - communication behaviours (across time, space and culture) - motives - intentions - prospective actions - risk and vulnerability - encapsulated interest - risk and uncertainty - element of a relationship - positive expectations - motive, behaviour and competence levels 	
Cumming & Bromiley (1996)		
Lane (1998)		
Jarvenpaa & Leidner (1999)		
Kramer (1999)		
Hardin (2002)		
Schoorman, Mayer & Davis (2007)		
Migliore & DeClouette (2011)		

Appendix 2: The application of trust in higher education studies

Author	Theme of research	Analytical and theoretical framework	Level of analysis	Method of analysis	Nature of analysis	Research context
Bok (1992)	Public trust [governance]	---	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	US
Trow (1996)	Links between higher education institutions and society	Trust, markets and accountability	System (Continental comparison)	Qualitative	Conceptual	US and Europe
Gibbs (1998)	Trusting relationships in higher education (Competence and Trust)	Forms of trust (Self-trustworthiness, Empathetic trust, and Competence of trust)	Dual (Individual & System)	Qualitative	Conceptual	UK
Jackson (1998)	Quality assurance	Regulatory regimes (Institutional self-regulation, External regulation, & Collaborative regulation, "Partnership in Trust")	System	Qualitative	Theoretical, conceptual	UK
Michael & Schwartz (1999)	Role of trustees	Sector, Gender Educational background, and Years of experience	Individual	Mixed [predominantly quantitative]	Empirical	US

Michael, Schwartz, & Cravencio (2000)	Leadership, trustees [governance]	Indicators of individual trustee's effectiveness (Knowledge, Contribution/Influence, Relationships, & Involvement)	Individual	Mixed [predominantly quantitative]	Empirical	US
Michael, Schwartz, & Balraj (2001)	Trustees [governance]	Indicators of presidential effectiveness (Knowledge, Influence, Relationship, & Management skills)	Individual	Mixed [predominantly quantitative]	Empirical	US
De Boer (2002)	University governance	Governance reforms	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	The Netherlands
Pope (2004)	Governance (in relation to faculty trust and participation)	Dimensions of trust (Competence, Benevolence, Openness, Reliability)	Institutional	Qualitative	Conceptual, Theoretical	---
Hoecht (2006)	Quality assurance	Power/control, Professional autonomy, and Accountability	System	Qualitative	Empirical	UK
Leveille (2006)	Accountability [governance]	---	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	US
Aasen & Stensaker (2007)	Leadership (management)	Academic leadership, Trustful mediation	Individual	Qualitative	Empirical	Europe

Amaral, Rosa, & Tavares (2009)	Quality assurance	Supra-national accreditation, Institutional autonomy, Trust	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	Comparison of US and Europe
Stensaker & Gornitzka (2009)	Governance	Rationalist-instrumentalist & Normative-cognitive perspectives of trust building	System	Qualitative	Theoretical	Europe
Vidovich & Currie (2011)	Governance	Tierney's dimensions of trust	Dual (institutional & system)	Qualitative	Conceptual	Australia
Bergan (2012)	Quality assurance	---	Dual (system, institutional)	Qualitative	Conceptual	Europe
Bloxham (2012)	Academic standards (quality)	Dimensions of academic standards; Techno-rational perspective on assessment of academic standards & Interpretive perspective	System & institutional	Qualitative	Conceptual	Global
Migliore (2012)	Leadership and governance (educational excellence)	Trust-centered Integrated Approach for Educational Excellence	Institutional	Qualitative	Conceptual	US
Perin et al. (2012)	Student loyalty	Relationship quality, and Student loyalty	Individual	Quantitative	Empirical	Brazil
Phelephs & Campbell (2012)	Librarian-faculty relationship	Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing	Individual	Qualitative	Literature review	Global

Singh (2012)	Quality assurance	Paradigm shift	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	Europe
Bird (2013)	Public trust	---	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	Global
Enders (2013)	Governance reform and trust/accountability	---	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	Global (emphasis on Europe)
Engwall & Scott (2013)	Trust	Audit, Media, and Market	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	Global
Huber (2013)	Quality assurance	Principal-agent relationship	Institutional	Qualitative	Conceptual	Global
McKelvey (2013)	Accountability and trust	University-industry interactions	Institutional	Qualitative	Conceptual	Europe
Spier (2013)	Teaching and research	---	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	Global
Sultan & Wong (2013)	Service quality	Antecedents, Real-time experience, and Consequences of service quality	Individual	Qualitative	Empirical	Australia

	Trust and loss of trust between scientific communities and governments	Performance measures, Entrepreneurialism	System	Qualitative	Conceptual	Global
Weingart (2013)						
Stensaker & Maassen (2015)	Quality assurance	Rationalist-instrumentalist & Normative-cognitive perspectives of trust building	System	Qualitative	Theoretical	International (cross-border quality assurance)
Yankech (2015)	Consortium of higher education institutions [governance]	Organisation Development Human Process Theory, Social Exchange Theory & Transaction Cost Economics Theory	Individual	Qualitative [phenomenological]	Empirical	US
Martins & Nunes (2016)	E-learning	Conditional/consequential matrix of trust (Trust to change, Trust to integrate, Trust to institutionalise)	Dual (individual & institutional)	Qualitative [grounded theory]	Empirical	Portugal
Nevzat et al. (2016)	Social media, university brand, loyalty to university	Attitude theory (Appraisal process, Emotional reaction, & Behavioural response)	Individual	Qualitative	Empirical	Cyprus
Hansen et al. (2019)	Trust and accountability, university reform	Types of accountability (Political/bureaucratic, Managerial, and Professional)	System (multi-country comparison)	Quantitative	Empirical	Nordic countries

Appendix 3: Interview and focus group guide

Below is the list of questions asked in the one-on-one interviews and focus group discussion. The composition, order and wording of the questions were adjusted to each group of respondents in the sample such as HERQA, public and private case institutions, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, and selected researchers and experts in quality assurance in the context of the Ethiopian higher education.

***Research question 1:** To what extent does the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia trust higher education institutions with respect to quality and quality assurance of higher education?*

Concern. Why did your institution initiate internal quality assurance procedures? What does your institution aim to gain from it? What is the purpose of accreditation and institutional audit for you? What does HERQA expect your institution to do in relation to quality assurance? To what extent does your institution refrain from operating in ways that violate stated regulations on quality? How committed are higher education institutions to responsibilities for internal quality assurance?

Capacity. How capable is your institution to conduct internal quality assurance practices? How many quality officers do you have? What kind of training have they received to equip them with knowledge and understanding necessary for carrying out quality assurance? Does your institution allocate sufficient financial and material resources?

How does HERQA assess the competence of higher education institutions in relation to responsibilities for quality assurance? How is seniority in public universities (i.e. first, second and third generations) and institutional status of private higher education institutions (i.e. university, university college, college) seen in relation to level of performance in quality assurance? Have you seen significant differences across such institutions? Do you think such diversity signals different levels of quality standards?

To what extent do you think HERQA has the necessary capacity to monitor quality of higher education institutions? How adequate is HERQA's current capacity for effectively implementing its mandates?

Openness. To what extent do you think institutions critically assess their strengths and weaknesses in their self-evaluation reports? Do you recall incidents where institutions you audited attempted to deceive peer reviewers (impression management, hiding weakness, orchestrated presentation)? What are the most common violations of regulations that are committed by public and private higher education institutions? What do you think are the reasons for institutions to engage in such deception? How did the panel of peer reviewers react to these instances? What happens to a higher education institution caught trying to deceive HEQA's experts during accreditation and audit? What do these deceptions say about the quality management system in place? How do such malpractices impact relevance and quality in higher education?

What is the purpose of the legal service office at HERQA? What are the most common cases that the legal service deals with? Can you tell about the most interesting or unforgettable case of deception and violation of regulation which may or may not have gone to the court? How often does HERQA win such legal suits against higher education institutions? Do you recall a case where HERQA lost its legal suit? Could you describe some of these cases? Why do you think HERQA lost these cases? How well are court decisions implemented by HERQA? How does HERQA implement administrative and legal measures against institutions caught violating regulations?

What mechanisms does HERQA use to monitor whether your institution is complying with quality assurance procedures and regulations? What kind of communication does your institution have with HERQA (frequency, channels of communication, tone of communication, common issues raised)? How can the existing quality system be improved to deter such deceptions? What kind of a quality assurance system can help avoid such deceptions and promote honest self-assessment at institutions?

There are rumours and allegations of corruption against experts/officers of HERQA particularly in their engagement with private higher education institutions. What do you think could be the reasons behind possible involvements in corruption? Has any stakeholder submitted a complaint to HERQA concerning allegations of corruption? Are mechanisms in place to facilitate such feedback? How do you think HEQA should address such allegations of corruption? What measures, if any, has been taken by the Ministry in response to allegations of corruptions?

Risk. Why do you think the Ministry is interested in regulating institutions (particularly private ones) through HERQA? Why did the Ministry set up HERQA? Where did the pressure (internal or external) come from? Who played the key role

in establishing HERQA? Why did the Ministry hire international consultants from the U.K. to set up, organise and lead HERQA during its early years?

What do you think will happen to quality standards if there was no accreditation and quality audits? How would institutions likely behave without external regulations in quality, or if HERQA did not exist? Do you think institutions would operate responsibly and take commitment on their own to safeguard the quality of education they provide? Can higher education institutions be trusted to assure and enhance their own quality without external inspection? Why do you think all my respondents (from the private and public case institutions, HERQA, Ministry and other stakeholders) did not agree this would be likely?

***Research question 2:** What implications does the extent to which the quality assurance agency in Ethiopia trust higher education institutions have for the nature of quality management model implemented in the Ethiopian higher education?*

Legal regulations. On which legislations and regulations do you base your quality assurance work? What roles do Education and Training Policy, higher education proclamation (no. 650/2009), Education Strategy Development Plan, Growth and Transformation Plan and other national frameworks play? How do these regulate your activities? What other legislation frameworks guide engagement in quality assurance at national and institutional levels? What kind of an institutional policy framework does your institution use to guide and facilitate quality assurance activities? Are the available legislative frameworks sufficient?

Why was it decided to revise the higher education proclamation (no. 650/2009)? What new provisions are included in the draft? What changes are anticipated from the revised proclamation, particularly in relation to HERQA's constrained autonomy and different accreditation requirements applied at public and private institutions?

Certifications. What credentials do you receive (issue) when your institution successfully undergoes accreditation? For what purpose do higher education institutions use certificates or other permits issued by HERQA? How does this certificate support your activities and visibility? How does HERQA motivate institutions to improve their quality standards? What incentives are provided?

Reputation. What kind of reputation does your institution strive to create? What role does quality assurance have in this? How do you work to create a reputation which signals high quality? Could you elaborate instances, if any, where your institution was benchmarked by another institution? Does your institution have any experience of sharing its good practices with other institutions?

How does HERQA view and approach higher education institutions with relatively better quality assurance system? In your experience of working as an accreditation and audit expert at HERQA, have you observed differences in the way in which external quality evaluations are done between higher education institutions who have built reputation for better commitment to quality and those who are suspected or have records of deception and violation of regulations on quality? If so, could you elaborate on these differences?

How are recommendations from an external quality evaluation implemented? How does HERQA follow up the progress of institutions in implementing their quality enhancement plans? Are there any instances where institutions initially agreed but later failed to implement recommendations of an audit? Does this formally or informally influence aspects of the future audits of that institution?

Shared values and norms. What values, vision and norms are shared between HERQA and higher education institutions? To what extent does your institution take into account HEQA's and the Ministry's interests in your operations?

How does HERQA view public and private higher education institutions? How does HERQA evaluate whether higher education institutions can be trusted to implement quality assurance responsibly? Do you feel private and public higher education institutions are trusted by HERQA? Do you think trust has been established between HERQA and higher education institutions? What are the sources of HERQA's concerns? To what extent does the quality assurance system address these concerns? Does the operation of HERQA adequately address these concerns?

Quality management models. How would you describe the role that HERQA and higher education institutions play in the current quality assurance system? In practice, who tends to be the primary owner and actor in quality assurance? What transformations (improvements and declines) have you observed in the management of quality in higher education at national and institutional levels?

How would you compare the level of top-down and bottom-up orientations in the current quality assurance system? Have higher education institutions developed a sense of ownership for quality assurance? What are the challenges?

How do you understand the relationship between accountability and trust? How do you assess the primary objective of the current quality assurance system at national and institutional levels? What positions have compliance to quality standards and quality enhancement assumed over the years in quality assurance procedures, practices and processes? What do you think is more important in the long run between accreditation and auditing? Given HERQA's acute capacity

limitations, where would you think could the resources of the agency be better focused: accrediting, regulating and monitoring higher education institutions or supporting the development of internal capacity at institutions for quality improvement? How would such prioritising serve the specific needs of higher education in Ethiopia?

Why do you think all my respondents, including the ones from case private institutions, called for a stronger and more effective control, inspection and monitoring by HERQA?

What is the level of attention given to quality enhancement works? How is information from quality assessment used in practice to improve quality standards? How does HERQA support quality enhancement activities at higher education institutions? What is the consequence if an institution fails to implement recommendations given by external reviewers?

What are the focus areas of quality audit and accreditation evaluations? How are the quality of educational inputs, teaching and learning processes and educational outputs assessed? Which of these aspects constitute the main focus of quality assurance at national and institutional levels?

How would you evaluate the government's and government's political discourse and rhetoric on the gravity of the quality problem against the scale of corrective measures taken and essential resources and overall support provided?

Private higher education institutions are accredited and audited whereas public universities are only audited. Why do you think HERQA focuses on strengthening its control and inspection work (accreditation of private institutions) rather than conducting audits (at both public and private institutions) while 86 per cent of the enrolment in higher education is accommodated at public institutions while private institutions account for about 14 per cent? How common do you think are such differential approaches in other higher education systems?

How does the Ministry and HERQA justify the application of dichotomous quality assurance requirements at public and private higher education institutions? To what extent has this practice addressed major quality concerns pervasive in the Ethiopian higher education system? What are the benefits and costs of tightly regulating private institutions and applying a markedly relaxed approach towards their public counterparts? How do you evaluate this approach from the principle of fairness and impartiality?

How do the interests of the Ministry shape such differential approaches to the public and private sector? What is the nature and goal of political pressures from the Ministry on HERQA? What conflict of interest could arise in such cases? Does the

differential treatment of the public and private sectors have basis in existing legal frameworks? How do you evaluate HERQA's level of managerial and operational autonomy?

How do you assess the organisation of HERQA and design of the existing quality assurance system, as was developed more than 10 years ago, in relation to the current needs and overall transformations that have taken place in the Ethiopian higher education landscape? Do you think the older model is able to cope with new transformations and considerable proliferation of higher education institutions?

From a strategic point of view, how should the current quality assurance system be improved? What is needed to transform the quality assurance system to incorporate enhancement orientation? What is the perspective of your organisation (Ministry, GIZ, ESC and Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions Association) on this matter?

Can widespread quality concerns be effectively addressed with the current quality assurance system and HERQA? How do you assess the feasibility and relevance of recommendations put forward in the draft Education Roadmap study regarding quality assurance and operations of HERQA?

How has been your overall impression of the Ethiopian higher education in relation to expansion and quality? How do stakeholders engage in quality assurance processes? Are there professional associations and organisations or networks of higher education institutions that support quality assurance?

What is the nature of your organisation's (GIZ, Jhpiego, EQA, ESC and Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions Association) involvement in quality assurance? What have you identified as the major challenges for quality of education in Ethiopia? What are the focus areas for your engagement in quality assurance in higher education? What are the objectives of your ongoing projects and intervention? Who are the partners and how were they selected? How and what kind of feedback do you receive from stakeholders such as HERQA, Ministry and higher education institutions regarding your work?

How would you evaluate the engagement of stakeholders such as your organisation in quality assurance processes? Do you think systems and structured mechanisms are in place to attract and engage stakeholders? In what ways can stakeholder engagement in quality assurance be better facilitated?

Appendix 4: Stages of data collection

Time	Data collection activity
2016, May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Historical documents pertaining to Ethiopian higher education - Legislative documents governing higher education during previous regimes
2017, November	<p><i>Pilot data collection involving:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 interviews with quality assurance director of Bahir Dar University and director of the Ethiopian Institute of Higher Education - A focus group discussion on Ethiopian quality assurance practices with 11 experts of the quality assurance agency (HERQA).
2018, September- October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 23 one-on-one interviews (21 main interviews and 4 supplementary interviews with stakeholders) - 2 focus group discussions with teams of accreditation and licensing experts and team of quality audit experts at the quality assurance agency (HERQA) - Sizeable national and institutional documents related to quality assurance activities
2018, December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview via Skype with an expert who served in the international panel commissioned by the World Bank to review of the performance of Ethiopian universities in Science and Technology. This review extended to external and internal quality assurance practices.
2019, February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interview with an officer from the legal services unit of the quality assurance agency (HERQA) - Interview with a policy analyst at the Education Strategy Centre

Appendix 5: Challenges encountered during data collection

When conducting interviews and focus groups, the researcher encountered challenges related to such as creating conducive atmosphere for interviews, breaking asymmetry of status between the researcher and respondents, controlling and directing discussions (particularly with senior management figures at Admas University and Medco Bio-Medical College) and rising critical questions without disturbing the interview atmosphere. Further, faced with a sense of uneasiness mostly on the part of the respondents from the studied private institutions, the researcher modified the articulation of certain sensitive questions such as those concerning allegations of corruption in accreditation to allow respondents speak more openly about substantive issues without focusing on whether these issues characterise their respective institutions.

At times, it was challenging to distinguish between rhetoric and facts, particularly while interviewing those with perceived vested interests in the image the quality assurance system of Ethiopian higher education has among the public and stakeholders, such as the key institutional management figures and senior officials at the Ministry. Babbie (2014) warns against the trustworthiness and objectivity of the information gathered from respondents, particularly when interviewing political figures and elites, since the information obtained may be a mixture of facts and personal points of view and, thus, likely to be biased. In such cases, it was challenging for the researcher to refrain from pointing out evidently unfounded claims. To mitigate this problem, the researcher encouraged respondents, in the beginning of the interviews, to provide truthful accounts to the best of their ability than projecting officially or politically endorsed positions that may contradict with facts on the ground. Another technique employed was to triangulate, where possible, the information obtained from such interviews with the evidence gathered from document reviews. The researcher also made efforts to prepare well for interviews by studying available materials.

Another fundamental challenge was the research-unfriendly environment pervasive in organisations. First, the researcher faced difficulty in gaining the consent and approval for data collection from Admas University, due to claims that the institution has been overwhelmed by requests for data collection from researchers and other stakeholders. Second, it was problematic to secure the consent for interviewing a senior management figure at Admas University, whom the researcher particularly needed to include in the study due to the fact that the person also serves in the leadership of the Ethiopian Private Higher Education and TVET Institutions'

Association. After repeated unsuccessful initial attempts, the researcher managed to negotiate a brief interview with the respondent in question. Third, there were instances where two of the respondents (key management figures at Medco Bio-Medical College and Admas University) cut the interviews short due to time constraints. Fourth, some crucial documents related to finance, profiles of human resources and students and letters exchanged between higher education institutions and HERQA were thought to be sensitive and, thus, considerably inaccessible. Access to such documents could have enhanced the overall quality of the empirical evidence.

Despite attempts, the researcher was not able to interview members from the international panel of experts who reviewed the role and function of HERQA in 2016. Additionally, there was no success in eliciting a response from an international expat who served as the founding director of the agency. Interviews with these respondents, given their particularly unique and valuable positions, could have enhanced the quality and depth of the study.

Appendix 6: Key values of HERQA

Types of values		Description
Core values	Public accountability	Commitment to social role and serving society
	Professionalism	Provide expert and professional service
	Transparent and impartial service delivery	Pursue impartiality and equal treatment of stakeholders
Additional values	Individual values	<i>Competence:</i> pursue responsibility with diligence, standards and demonstration of professional ability
		<i>Professional integrity:</i> operate with honesty, professional ethics and social responsibility
		<i>Self-initiation:</i> take initiative, willingness and wholehearted approach in discharging responsibilities
	Organisational values	<i>Trusted partnership:</i> establish relationship with stakeholders based on trust, confidence, mutual respect and benefit, and respect for confidentiality and avoid possible conflict of interest
		<i>Participatory teamwork:</i> promote internal synergy, diversified competencies and consultation
Operational values	<i>Client satisfaction:</i> render proactive and quality service to ensure satisfaction of stakeholders	
		<i>Credibility:</i> demonstrate trust, public satisfaction and acceptance

	Strategic value	<p><i>Efficiency and effectiveness:</i> enable the output and outcome of the education system to be reflected in national socio-economic and technological development</p> <p><i>Commitment to excellence:</i> pursue continuous improvement in the quality of services provided to stakeholders</p>
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(Source: compiled from HERQA, 2006a, p. 6-7)

Appendix 7: Institutional values at the case higher education institutions

Higher education institution	Mekelle University	Wollo University	Woldia University	Admas University	Sheba University College	Medco Bio-Medical College
Institutional value	<p>Quality and speedy service delivery</p> <p>Institutional autonomy</p> <p>Academic freedom</p> <p>Accountability</p> <p>Competitiveness</p> <p>Cooperation</p> <p>Participatory governance</p> <p>Research and scientific practice</p> <p>Professional and ethical integrity</p> <p>Fairness and justice</p> <p>Gender equality</p> <p>Fighting corruption</p> <p>Efficiency</p> <p>Innovation</p> <p>Democracy</p>	<p><i>Organisational values:</i></p> <p>Quality and excellence</p> <p>Equity</p> <p>Reliable partnership</p> <p>Academic freedom</p> <p>Diversification</p> <p>Expansion</p> <p>Collaboration</p> <p>Transparency</p> <p>Accountability</p> <p><i>Individual values:</i></p> <p>Honesty</p> <p>Confidentiality</p> <p>Loyalty</p> <p>Innovativeness</p> <p>Self-initiation</p> <p>Competence</p> <p>Collaboration</p>	<p>Quality</p> <p>Customer centered operation</p> <p>Participatory leadership</p> <p>Fairness</p> <p>Determination</p> <p>Research</p> <p>Democratic thinking</p>	<p>Quality first</p> <p>Professionalism and integrity</p> <p>Accountability and transparency</p> <p>Responsiveness</p> <p>Tolerance and mutual respect</p> <p>Team spirit</p>	<p>No clearly articulate value</p>	<p>Quality</p> <p>Integrity</p> <p>Respect</p> <p>Collaboration</p>

(Source: compiled from the strategic documents of institutions)

