Breaking Higher Education's Iron Triangle through Distance Education: The Case of IGNOU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of access to quality postgraduate distance education. It was developed within an argument that access to conventional face-to-face postgraduate studies is still a challenge in developing countries. It argues that distance education can be used as an alternative means of meeting the increasing demand for higher education in the country concerned. This study used a case study of Masters of Arts in Rural Development (MARD) program that is offered by Indira Ghandi National Open University in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to gather the relevant data. The study established that distance education has a huge potential as an alternative and cost-effective means of providing quality higher education in Ethiopia. The study suggests that careful planning and integration of distance education into the national higher education policy will enable effective and efficient provision of quality distance postgraduate education in developing countries like Ethiopia.

Keywords: Access, quality, cost, Higher education, delivery mode, distance education, distance education generations, qualitative method, quality assurance, conventional education

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the traditional face-to-face method is no longer the only means of accessing higher education. An alternative means has been devised in response to a demand for access to higher education. An ever-growing world population; an increase in the complexity of all aspects of life; increasingly higher education requirements for almost all types of jobs; accelerating change in nearly all occupations and jobs; and the special educational needs of disadvantaged and minority groups have all put pressure on the pursuit of an alternative means of access to higher education.

Higher education with appropriate quality and low cost is not achievable within traditional systems of higher education which is based on classroom teaching and learning mode. Expansion is now the defining trend in the worldwide development of higher education. Some scholars have predicted that by 2020, 40 present of the global workforce will be knowledge workers with a need for tertiary qualifications Mannan, (2009). The World Bank, which made basic education its priority in the 1980s and 1990s, has changed its focus towards the development of higher education. This is an indication that higher education is getting precedence in the contemporary knowledge based economy. This, in turn, requires countries that have not yet developed their higher education systems to do so.   Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that developing countries want to join the knowledge society by following the example set by developed countries, where age participation rates in higher education of 40 to 50 % are now perceived as necessary for sustained and sustainable development *Kanwar, (2009:30).* According to Mannan, (2013), national policies on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) emphasise the need for expansion of the education system, which focuses on the conventional method of delivery of basic education and tertiary level services in building human and social capital. However, today, it is further seeking and explaining the role of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as an intervening strategy to break the conventional business as usual and in doing so providing access to higher education services and dissemination of information and knowledge that affects personal and community life of individuals became vital especially in developing countries.

Higher education in Ethiopia has over the years faced problems of under-development which found expression in the neglect of higher education by successive governments since the turn of 20th century. Some of the features of the system include inequitable access to higher education, out-dated curriculum and poor quality of education. Currently, higher education faces problems associated with the relevance of programmes of studies and research, equity, resource constraints and inefficient utilisation of resources Bogale, (2006).   The result of this is that access to higher education opportunities, in general, and postgraduate education, in particular, has been limited. This has necessitated the need to look at the alternative means of providing higher education especially in developing countries like Ethiopia.

Globally, higher education has been expanding over the last few decades and, according to Altbach *et al*. (2009), it has struggled to meet demands. According to a UNESCO (2003) report, many countries have experienced higher rates of expansion and increase in student enrolment than anticipated. New, non-traditional learners have also appeared on the scene;

these are "mature" students i.e. those who are 30 years and over, who either had missed the opportunity of benefiting from higher education, or who want to improve on their qualifications, or who desire a career change. Lifelong learning is now a common trend worldwide. This mass demand for higher education is creating great pressure for systems and institutions which are required to provide higher education of quality and relevance to the many students who are seeking to better their lot in life through higher education.

The same trend of a rapidly growing demand for tertiary education is seen in most African countries, even over the past decade. For example, in Uganda, enrolments grew from 20,000 in 2001 Musisi, (2003) to close to 180,000 in 2011. In Ethiopia, there was an increase from 79,000 in 1991 to more than 600,000 students in the higher education system in 2012 Teferra, (2014). In Kenya, enrolments in state universities have risen by 41% in two years – from 1995,428 in 2012 to 276,349 by the end of 2013 Nganga, (2014). However, these increased enrolments were not accompanied by investment of resources and this had serious implications for quality.

Internationally, different means of providing higher education have been explored as a result of the realisation of the inadequacy of traditional contact institutions to meet the increasing demand for higher education. Distance education is generally viewed as an alternative mode of higher education provision. In making a case for distance higher education, the Department of Higher Education and Training in South Africa, notes in its White Paper for Post School Education and Training System (2014) that in recent years, distance education has formed a vital part of the university sub-system, contributing approximately 40% of headcount students and approximately 30% of FTE students. It has provided extensive opportunities to those students who were unable, or wished not, to participate in campus-based and fixed time study, including provision of access for those who experience a range of barriers to learning.

Distance education is also no longer offered by national institutions, but it has taken an international dimension with cross border institutions being involved in the provision of education in areas where there are needs. Knight (2007) explains cross-border mobility of providers of the physical or virtual movement of an education provider (institution, organisation, company) across a national border to establish a presence so as to offer education/training programmes and/or services to students and other clients. The overall demand for higher and adult education, especially professionally related courses is increasing in most countries. There are a number of reasons for this including, among others, changing demographics, the increased number of secondary school graduates, and the movement to lifelong learning, as well as the growth of the knowledge economy. While the demand is growing, the capacity of the public sector to satisfy this need is being challenged Knight, (2006). While the international mobility of students and scholars represent long-standing forms of academic mobility, it has only been over the past two decades that greater emphasis has been placed on the movement of educational programmes, higher education institutions and new commercial providers across national borders.

Given the less developed nature of higher education systems in developing countries, many

of these countries have become targets of cross border providers who capitalised on the lack of capacity by governments to meet the growing demand for higher education. The lack of access to postgraduate education has contributed to a shortage of qualified staff in public universities and other areas that require high skills in both the public and the private sectors. It is argued that given the constraints of resources to provide adequate access to higher education through traditional contact mode of delivery, distance education providers would plays an important role in providing access to quality higher education. To this end, this article uses the Indira Ghandi National Open University as a case study to explore the role of distance cross-border higher education providers in providing access to post graduate education in Ethiopia. It asks the research question *"How can distance education enhance access to quality postgraduate education in Ethiopia?"*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Background to higher education in Ethiopia

For many centuries until the early 1990s when secular education was adopted, education in Ethiopia was dominated by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Higher education was only launched in 1950 following the establishment of the Addis Ababa University College. Not much improvement in education was observed during Emperor Haile Selassie's regime from 1930 until 1974. The noticeable achievement in this period was the establishment of the Addis Ababa University College. The Soviet-backed military junta, the "Dreg'', led by the Mengistu Haile Mariam regime which took over and ruled the country from 1974 to 1991, established four university colleges. In many ways these were, mainly, dependent on Addis Ababa University which played a leading role in terms of their establishment, curriculum design and development and staff recruitment.

The education system in Ethiopia has, generally, faced a number of problems, including inequality, inaccessibility, the irrelevance of the old education system and low quality. Generally, higher education in Ethiopia was neglected and, consequently, became underdeveloped. Currently, higher education faces problems associated with the quality and relevance of programmes of studies and research, equity, resource constraints and inefficient use of resources. The universities' have not been able to produce the large numbers of the human resources required for the development of the country Bogale, (2006). After acknowledging the undeveloped status of higher education in the country, the present Ethiopian government introduced reforms in the higher education system to enable higher education institutions to contribute to the development of human resources needed for the social and economic development of the country. The main reason for restructuring the Ethiopian education system was to bring about a desired quality of standard and a relevant system for the economic development of the country - an aspect which was not recognised by the old education system. Thus, the major focus of higher education in the country should be to provide quality and relevant education.

As a result, new higher education reform policies were adopted in Proclamation No.351 of

2003 and Proclamation No.650 of 2009 MoE, (2009). For the first time, following the implementation of these reforms, higher education institutions became autonomous and were able to run and manage their own affairs, including appointing their own academic vice-presidents and institutional managers.

Since its inception the effects of the new education and training policy include a significant increase in the number of higher education institutions and – as a consequence - the enrolment rate and participation of female students in higher education. Table 1.1 presents the enrolment trends in postgraduate programmes in higher institutions for both public and private higher educational institutions.

Table 1.1. Enrolment Trends in Postgraduate Programmes in Higher Education Institutions by Ownership, Degree Programme, Sex and Year

	Public or Government				**Non-Government**		**Total**		
	Master's		**PhD**		**Master's**				**% Female**
Year	**Total**	**Female**	**Total**	**Female**	**Total**	**Female**	**Total**	**Female**	
2007/08	7,211	702	258	7	-	-	7,469	709	9.5
2008/09	9,436	1,069	325	26	364	51	10,125	1,146	11.3
2009/10	12,621	1,485	791	47	860	171	14,272	1.703	11.9
2010/11	18,486	2,490	789	99	875	193	20,150	2782	13.8
2012	22,804	4,635	1849	319	1,007	228	25,660	5182	20.2

Source: MoE, Statistical Abstract, (2011/12

The above table shows a significant increase in postgraduate enrolment, both in public and private higher educational institutions in Ethiopia. The percentage of female postgraduate students in the country also indicates a significant improvement from 9% in 2007 to 20.2% in (2012). The sharp increase in enrolment was because of the private higher education sector, including distance education. However, tertiary enrolment in Ethiopia remains significantly low compared to other developing countries. Currently, it stands at 2.5% suggesting that more needs to be done to develop alternative means of education. Therefore, government needs to attract more private investors especially in the higher education sectors. In Ethiopia, as in other African countries, distance education could facilitate the advancement of human resource development at different levels.

2.2 Distance education in Ethiopia and around the world

The Ethiopian Distance Learning Association (EDLA) and the International Open College of Ethiopia (IOCE) observed that if the country aims to improve the living conditions of its people through education, then it should recognise and acknowledge an inevitable paradigm shift from a traditional face-to-face system of education to a system of distance education Nwuke, 2008). However, in Ethiopia, the national education policy has overlooked distance education despite the role it plays in responding to society's needs for access to higher

education. Thus, higher education - through distance education - is deemed to be necessary in order to improve the education system to respond to the ever-growing human resource needs of the country Fayessa, (2010). It is argued that distance education offers an alternative delivery system that could meet the envisaged demand for quality human resources in Ethiopia. In order to cope with the increasing demand for higher education in a context of diminishing resources, many countries have resorted to distance education as an alternative means of providing access to higher education. Today, many worldwide mega universities provide distance education as a single mode of delivery system. Table 1.2 illustrates the current higher education enrolment rate in distance education in different countries.

Table 1.2. Enrolment in distance education by country and institution

Country	Institution	Established	Enrolment
India	Indira Gandhi National Open University	1985	3.5.million
Pakistan	Allamaiqball Open University	1974	3.2. million
China	Open University of China	1979	2.7.million
Turkey	Anadolu University	1982	884,081
Indonesia	University of Terbuka	1984	646,467
Bangladesh	Open University of Bangladesh	1992	600,00
South	University of South Africa	1873	328,179
Africa	Korean National Open university	1982	210,978
Korea	The Open University of the United	1969	203,744
UK	Kingdom	1987	183,000
Iran	Payame Noor University	1978	181,372
Thailand	SukhothaiThammathiratou	1972	180,000
Spain	Universidad Nacional de Educion a Distancia		

Source: Allen and Seaman, (2012:213).

Founded in 1985, the Indira Gandhi National Open University offers 310 degree programmes in arts, science, commerce, social sciences and information technology through its 21 schools. It is the largest distance university in the world with more than four million students in India as well as in 36 other countries. It has a well-established infrastructure to cope with the large number of students. For example, it has about 36 000 academic counsellors, 67 regional centres, about 3000 learner support centres and 67 overseas centres. The university has 420 faculty members and academic staff. This university is considered to be the world leader in distance   education (http://www.squidoo.com/top-10-distance-learning-universities-inthe-world).

AllamaIqball Open University in Pakistan is the second largest Open University with a total of 3.2 million students. The University of South Africa (UNISA), the oldest distance education university, founded in 1873, had 328,179 student enrolments in 2012. The above

table shows that the highest enrolment rate is found in developing countries. For example, China, India and Pakistan are the three leading countries in terms of distance education student enrolment. However, as presented in Table 1.2, the number of the distance education institutions in the developing nations is small when compared to the so-called developed countries. When offered the chance, distance education became an option for many African adults as a means of pursuing their academic careers due to its merits and the quality of the distance education programmes Pityana, (2004).

Cross border education provision through distance mode in Ethiopia: Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in Ethiopia

As indicated in the previous section, IGNOU is one of the international institutions which offer postgraduate level distance education programmes in Ethiopia. However, it is not the only cross-border distance education provider in the country as there are some other international providers as well. The University of South Africa (UNISA), for example, is one of those which - in collaboration with the Ministry of Education - has been operating in Ethiopia since 2006 and has contributed to the capacity building and human resource development needs of the country. In Ethiopia, UNISA is known as a regional learning centre for East African countries. Collaboration between UNISA and the MoE was established through the initiative of two statesmen: the former President of South Africa, Mr Thabo Mbeki and the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Mr Meles Zenawi, UNISA-Ethiopia Newsletter, (2011).

Table1.3, below illustrates the enrolment of students who have graduated at IGNOU since its inception in 2006 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Table 1.3. IGNOU Student Data in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from July 2006 to January 2012

S/N	Programme	Registered Students	Graduated students	Active Students
1	MARD	577	199	378
2	MBA	473	64	409
3	MCOM	494	48	446
4	MEC	769	82	687
5	MLIS	11	3	8
6	MPA	518	79	439
7	MSO	873	273	600
8	MSW	400	9	391
9	MPS	7	1	6
TOTAL	9	**4122**	758	3364

(Source: Compiled from data received from IGNOU and SMUC, (2012)

Some programmes, like the Master of Art in Political Science, have very few students. Among the largest number of enrolments in the above programmes is the Master of Art in Rural Development (MARD). The focus of this study has a relatively significant number of graduated and active students - as is shown in the above table. A large number of the participants reflected in the above table attended the Master of Art in Public Administration (MPA) which trains many public and private sectors administrators for participation in the country's various levels of governance.

2.3 The Iron Triangle of Access, Quality and Costs

Throughout history, education has been constrained by the iron triangle of access, quality and cost. The three concepts dominated the concerns for promoting distance education as an alternative sources to conventional higher education are: the increasing cost of higher education; the challenge of providing access to new generations of students including marginalized groups; and the need to maintain and improve educational quality (along with the need to be accountable for that quality). Any of these goals would be challenging enough, for traditional higher education, MoE officials and managers Immerwahr, (2002:24).The main challenge facing education and higher education in particular is how to break this relationship because if access is increased, it is likely to lower quality. Thus, if this is to be avoided, then the costs would have to be raised. ODL is revolutionary because it allows us, through division of labour, specialization, and economies of scale to reconfigure the access-quality and cost triangle.

Access can be increased, quality can be improved and costs can be cut, all at the same time. In terms of quality, the UK Open University is instructive. Independent rankings of the quality of the teaching programmes in UK universities put the Open University in 5th place out of 100 institutions. Furthermore, cost studies conducted by the UK government show that whichever way the calculations were done, the total cost of the Open University degree is substantially less than in conventional institutions Asha & Daniel, (2009).

In the 21st Century, Open and Distance Learning is a revolutionary innovation in providing access to various level educational opportunities. Even though distance education has been in existence for over 150 years. It is only in the last forty years that its growth has been so phenomenal. Today, ODL is seen as a cost effective tool for providing education and training at all levels and for a variety of disciplines and professions. This has been due largely to developments in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) which have made it possible to make effective pedagogic interventions for providing unlimited flexible learning options to different groups of learners Daniel, (2009).
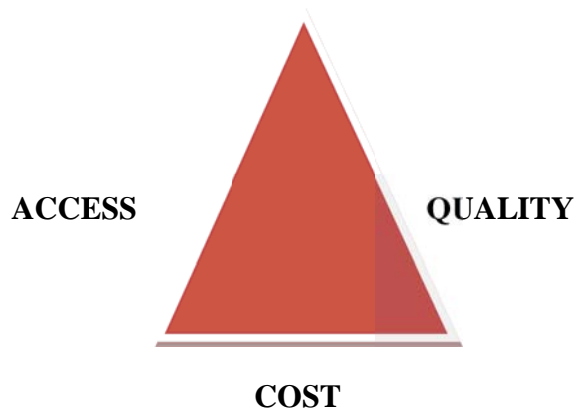
Figure 1. The diagram of higher education Iron Triangle

Our premise is _**access**_ to higher education via distance education is good and cost-effective. But it is not enough to conclude on the premises of access, however, distance education needs to provide a flexible source of _quality_ postgraduate education as well cost-effective. We show that although IGNOU provides access to postgraduate distance education, further studies are needed to ascertain the _coherence_, _efficiency_ and _impact_ aspects of the quality.

Suppose the necessary day-to-day organizational conditions in the operation of IGNOU as a cross-border distance educational institution is provided; These conditions might be formal and informal: formal conditions refer to the official structure, arrangement of policy framework, and the quality enhancement procedures; for example, the formal condition includes curriculum designs, administrative and academic support and course materials preparation and assessment methods; informal conditions might include the relationship of staff among themselves and students to student's interactions. The study shows that these conditions give rise to the quality postgraduate studies for the learners in Ethiopia. Furthermore, we theorize that the following conditions on the programmes of postgraduate distance education should ensure _quality_:

- For the purpose of quality assurance; relevant and accredited organizations must accredit the quality of the programs.

- The programs should meet the needs of the current human resources development needs of the country. The quality assurance indicator of the country is a measure of how far the needs are met.

The teaching-learning quality of the programme fulfils the needs of the learners and employing organizations.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of Latchem and Jung (2007) and Perraton (2000) was adopted and used to guide data analysis. The framework is based on the quality assurance indicators in open and distance learning. The framework adopted examines the various quality assurance approaches employed in Asian open and distance learning universities. In their context, different ways of managing the quality in a distance institution were proposed. It brings together the three quality indicators chosen for this study, namely: coherence, efficiency and impact. The first quality indicator of the study is known as 'coherence' which relates to the national education policies with regard to distance education development and the private sector. It was found that like other higher education institutions in Ethiopia IGNOU followed the country's higher education policy and guidelines to operate in partnership with local private higher institutions. 'Efficiency' is the second quality indicator used to assess the institution's various activities such as the quality of course materials, student support services and learner's assessment methods. The third quality indicator is 'impact' which is concerned with the assessment function of the various stakeholders' perceptions including among others, the MoE, HERQA (write in full)as well as the main key players of the study: the graduates of MARD, prospective students and staff members. The theoretical approach posits that there is interplay between the main activities of teaching and learning, which directly affect the quality in higher education in general and distance education in particular.

4. Methodology

A qualitative research design was used in this study. In particular, a case study was employed. Stratified and purposive sampling techniques were used to select the research site and potential respondents. The study was delimited to the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in Ethiopia. IGNOU was selected as a case study because it is one of the largest universities in the world which provides higher education opportunities by means of a distance mode to local, national and international students. It is also one of the leading educational institutions in Ethiopia with a high number of postgraduate students compared to other private universities in the country. It offers nine Master's programmes, namely: Master of Business Administration; Master of Commerce; Master of Arts in Public Administration; Master of Arts in Rural Development**;** Master of Arts in Economics; Master of Arts in Sociology; Master of Arts in Political Science; Master of Arts in Social Work; and Master of Arts in Tourism Management. The focus on the Master in Rural Development was based on the fact that a majority of the Ethiopian population (85%) is engaged in agricultural work and lives in rural areas Tesfaye, (2010). As result, an education programme that has a focus on rural educational development will have some relevance in this context, especially in meeting the human resource needs of the country.

A total of 30 participants were purposively selected from those who already involved in distance education programs and interviewed accordingly. Categorically, the sample consisted of ten interviewees drawn from the research site (IGNOU, Addis Ababa); four were from management bodies and were decision-makers and six were from academic staff members,

including the programme coordinator and head of department. The sample also included five graduates and five prospective MARD students, making a total of ten MARD students. It also consisted of five senior officials from the Federal Ministry of Education - two policy-makers, two higher education experts and one official responsible for private higher education institutions, including distance education. Five officials from the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA), three of whom are senior officials responsible for both accreditation and quality audits and two were from the External Quality Auditor at Addis Ababa University (AAU).

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and document review.Yin (2003) posits that a notable hallmark of a case study is the use of various, different sources of evidence (p. 85). The use of the two methods was based on the advice given by Demimonde, (2009) who argues that any weaknesses inherent in one method would be compensated for by the strengths in the other (p. 166).In particular, the use of more than one method of data collection implies 'triangulation' in a study Yin, (2009: 115) and this, in turn, enhanced both the credibility and the validity of this study.The documentary information and the interviews were analysed and interpreted using the qualitative research paradigm. The findings of the study were systematically analysed to build an argument using factors from the analysis and an interpretation of the major themes which were sub-divided into three core parts. The analysis techniques comprised a number of activities, such as selecting, describing, interpreting, evaluating and connecting evidence to communicate the findings to the readers Dey, (1993).
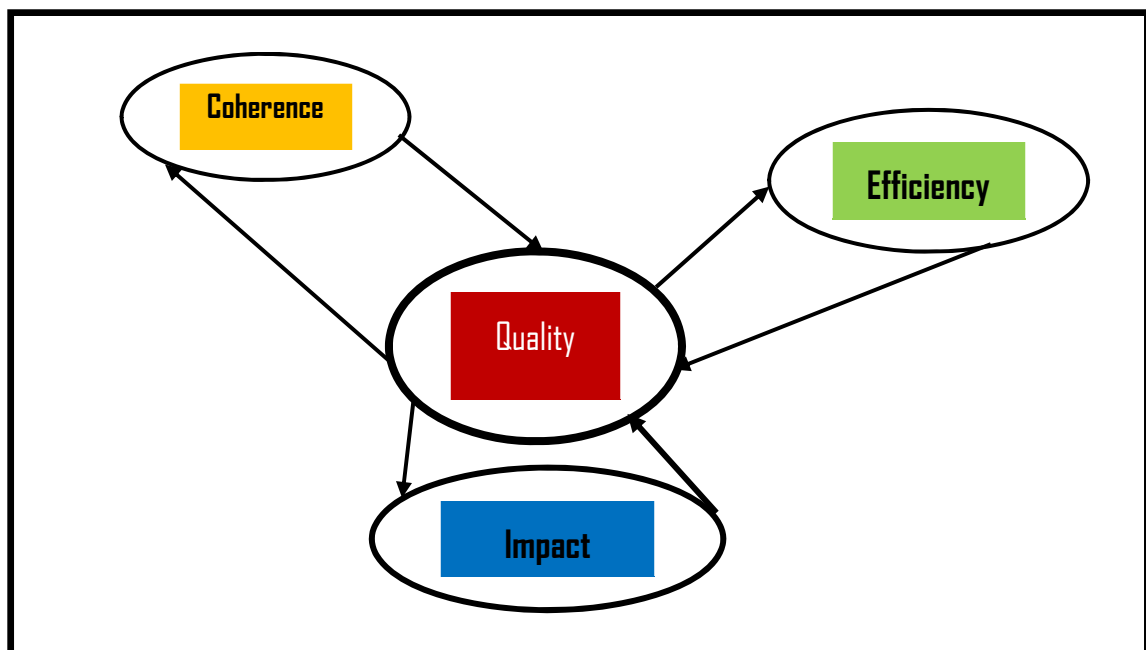

Figure 2. Breaking Higher Education's Iron Triangle through Distance Education: The Case of IGNOU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

5. Discussion of the Findings

This article critically examines the extent to which private providers facilitate access to quality postgraduate education through distance education in Ethiopia. The study was anchored on the assumption cross-border distance education providers play important role in enhancing access to higher education.

5.1 Education Policy and its Implications for the Development of Distance Education

This refers to the investigation of the involvement of the private sector and, specifically, how cross-border distance education providing institutions have responded to the higher education sector policy in the country. This part of the discussion includes HERQA's policy and strategic guidelines as well as IGNOU's quality enhancement policy, strategic plans and procedures in line with the first quality indicator of the study known as 'coherence'. Evidence from the data analysis and the literature supports the opinion that Ethiopia's higher education sector is, in general, underdeveloped, and that distance education, in particular, does not sufficiently respond to the needs of specific group. It was expected that the education policy could promote access to all types of education in Ethiopia, including distance education. However, the review of policy documents indicate that distance education has been overlooked and neglected. What is interesting with regard to the national education policy document of Ethiopia is that the flexible aspects of education are implied but not clearly stated and that they are, therefore, lost in implementing policy. The practices of the distance teaching institutions in Ethiopia have been adversely affected by a lack of national policy guidelines to set standards of practice. Therefore, a comprehensive education policy that promotes the development of open and distance education in the country is needed to alleviate this problem. Thus, the majority of participants in this study suggested that the Ethiopian government should develop a clear policy on distance education programmes and, thereby, ensure its quality.

5.2 The Institutional and Pedagogical Practices at IGNOU

This section assesses and analyses IGNOU's provision of increasing access to postgraduate education for the workforce of the country and, thereby, contributing to the human resource development needs of the country. It is related, to the second quality indicator namely, 'Efficiency' which mainly focuses, on the learners, staff and the various support services which could be provided to postgraduate students, including course materials and quality assessment and evaluation methods. These are presented as follow.

- *Quality of course materials*

Quality in distance education is perceived in relation to course materials and services in this study are used to refer 'fitness for purpose'. Most student participants expressed positive perceptions of the quality of their course materials. Furthermore, students specified that they depend, mostly, on tutorial materials for study purposes - something which they found practically useful. Relevant and quality course and study materials enrich the quality of education offered by distance education institutions Taylor, (2001). Since open learning and distance education teaching and learning mechanisms need to be student-centred, course and

study materials are of primary importance for the achievement of this purpose. The quality of course materials at IGNOU was confirmed to be fairly good by the MoE and HERQA participants.

However, the general view was that there is a need to supplement the printed materials, adopted by IGNOU as the main teaching media, with audio and video tapes. There were also a few students and officials who commented on the content of the course materials and suggested that there was a room for further improvement. This was mainly from comments made that the course materials and content, which were dominated by the Indian context, would need to be changed to be more relevant in the Ethiopian context. As evidence to this, one student participants commented as follows:

> *"No doubt about the quality of course materials, the course description in the modules were found to be useful, self-explanatory, but some of them are hard to internalize until we get further explanation during the tutorial sessions. Although the quality of course material is commendable, the Indian context in some courses still needs to be changed to fit the Ethiopian context."*

- *Quality of student support services*

According to Kishore (1998) and Mills (2006), ensuring access to and quality of student support services is part of the educational institution's major responsibilities. The majority of the student participants rated the services rendered by the administrative staff at IGNOU, especially at the local level, as generally satisfactory. However, there were some students who commented that the support they received from headquarters in New Delhi was not to their satisfaction and this was something which needs greater attention and improvement by the institution. As one student participant, whose views were supported by fellow students, had the following to say:

> *"The final exam is marked and assessed from headquarters in New Delhi and sent to the partner institutions later. But the return of the feedback normally takes two months and sometimes more. I think it needs further improvement to have the student feedback with in shorter time's frames."*

At IGNOU the student support services are organised from the head office in conjunction with the partner institution. However, at the time of gathering this data, IGNOU did not have a single branch office in any of the regional centres outside Addis Ababa. In this regard, it appears that the institution seems to be saving costs by not expanding services beyond Addis Ababa. It had no branches or centres to make the student services more accessible - even in highly populated regions - which call for improvement.

If IGNOU wants to satisfy the educational needs of the people who are looking for alternative means of access to higher education, it should, arguably, do more to establish branches of learning centres - at least in the bigger regional centres where many distance education students are living and working. The success of distance education to provide required and relevant levels of student support services, in terms of administration and academic supports is, therefore, vital.

- *Quality of assessment and evaluation*

Assessment is recognized as a key motivator of learning and an integral part of teaching and learning. Detailed feedback to students' assignments and written work is seen as an important means of learner support. Monitoring the performance of distance education is more relevant as this mode of education is learner-based. The findings of this study point to the fact that the assessment methods used at IGNOU are sub-divided into three parts namely; self-assessment, formative and summative evaluation. In terms of the IGNOU learners' assessment methods, all assignments and projects that are seen as formative assessment techniques comprise 30% of the total or semester results and the remaining end of term examination makes up 70% of the final semester result. However, the majority of students confirmed that the formative and summative assessment methods of evaluation at IGNOU were very rigid and strict. The student participants said they had to complete four to six assignments by pre-specified due dates before they were allowed to write their term-end examinations. In relation to this, some students indicated that their results from the head office in India took an average of two to three months to reach them which they felt was a weakness and suggested that this be an issue that should be given further attention. Regarding feedback for the final examination, one of the student participants had the following to say:

> "…After we did our final exams, which they call it normally the term-end exams and which is taken twice a year at all host and partner institutions at different places but in the same times. This final exam is marked and assessed from headquarters in New Delhi and sent to the partner institutions later. But the return of the feedback normally takes two months and sometimes more. I think it needs further improvement to have the student feedback within shorter time's frames".

Therefore, the institution needs to look into this matter as it also, partially, affects the quality of distance education. Furthermore, it was suggested that IGNOU's and HERQA's assessment methods should include the practice of collecting feedback from the labour market through tracer studies to catalogue employers' perspectives as well as comments from professional organizations.

5.3 Perceptions of Stakeholders of the Quality of Postgraduate Level Distance Education

In this category, key players were students and officials at different levels of the institution, including tutors and general decision-making bodies at IGNOU. This study revealed that there was a general consensus among graduates and faculty members regarding the achievements of the MARD programme and the acceptance of its graduates in the workplace. This was analysed in relation to the third quality indicator "Impact". The findings indicate an acceptance of the graduates in the workplace in terms of their successful completion of this programme.

There is a sense that increasing access to higher education, in itself, may be perceived as important and equivalent to quality in higher education. Some participants did not fully agree that quality postgraduate education was being provided by IGNOU. Rather, there were

comments that the MoE should seriously follow-up and monitor the relevance and quality of this sector. For instance, the following perspective was given by one of the MoE participants:

"Well, the perception has to be based on experiences; however, as educational experts we need to know HERQA and MoE's evaluation results on IGNOU's postgraduate education quality. First and foremost, according to my knowledge, the cross-border provider's motive, priority and relevance have to be assessed; whether these providers are providing higher education according to its relevance and quality required to the satisfaction of the country's human resources needs, or only for money-making purposes. I said this because Ethiopia does not have much experience in cross-border distance education and some experiences from other places are teaching us to be cautious in implementing distance education programmes."

It seems that all participants were not of the same opinion with regard to the quality of postgraduate distance education provided by IGNOU. This suggests that, in order to ensure the quality of cross-border distance education programmes in the country, an adequate policy framework for quality assurance system needs to be established.

6. Discussion and Reflections on the Findings

In this section we discuss the implications of the findings. There is increasing recognition among scholars as well as participants in this study that distance education wider access to higher education for women, marginalised people and working populace. It also improves the quality of the existing education system and maintains equity by democratising higher education. However, the debate around distance education calls for further improvement within this sector. Participants in this study suggested that the student support services which remain centralised need to be decentralised as many postgraduate distance education students come from far regional areas. In addition, it was also revealed that final results took an average of two or three months to be returned to them. This indicates a weakness in feedback mechanism and this called for a change and improvement. In an attempt to widen access to those who are marginalised and living in rural areas greater resources are required from different stakeholders including private sector in order to develop efficient and effective distance education. Therefore, higher education, in general, and distance education, in particular, can be achieved through the collaboration of government, universities and the private sector. The participants of this study, collectively and individually, said that there are many factors that hinder the effective development of distance education. The problems as revealed by the participants relate to the institution, stakeholders' perceptions of distance education as well as, the policies of national education in the country. Indeed, stories from a number of participants indicate the importance of policy integration into distance education programmes. This implies that national education policy should, more effectively, include distance education as well as the non-formal education sector. Furthermore, it was suggested that HERQA should have a clear policy framework with more autonomy and authority to be an external quality control agency for conventional and distance higher education.

In terms of the quality of IGNOU's postgraduate studies all participants were not in agreement. To say that the quality of distance education at this level is at the desired quality standard seems to be unrealistic. However, they all agreed and acknowledged that IGNOU's provision of access to postgraduate studies had positive aspects.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the constraints of resources that many governments face in meeting the demand for higher education, distance education is seen as an alternative mode of delivery in providing access to quality higher education. In particular, in developing countries, including Ethiopia, distance education providers, such as IGNOU, offer educational opportunities for rural-based communities and marginalised groups, who would, otherwise, not have been able to access higher education. This article demonstrates that distance education can provide access to higher education in the Ethiopian context. However, it is difficult to determine whether the quality issues are up to the required standard. Rather, there is a need to encourage the institute to fulfil the quality indicators in order to enhance quality of higher education. We argued in this article that government should make a greater effort to utilise the full potential of distance education by providing policy framework for the sector and to assure development of quality assurance policies and, thereby, meet the various human resource development needs of the country. Support through distance learning is particularly appropriate for reasons of convenience and economics. The costs of reproducing and distributing eLearning materials are tiny, so it costs little to widen access to them. Based on that, distance education provides wide access to many people including marginalised group at low cost. This article recommends that in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of distance education the following need to done: decentralise services into different regional administrative centres, and put in place quality assurance mechanisms and integrate into the national education. We also highlighted the key factors which impact on the growth of distance education programmes in the country. In particular the possibility of improving and integrating with the conventional education systems through the policy framework, and furthermore, it highlighted the use of modern information and communication technologies ICTs in these programmes.

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