Understanding Quality: Examining Addis Ababa University Students' Conceptualizations through the Harvey and Green (1993) Quality Framework

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Abstract: As elusive and contentious as the term quality is, according to Harvey and Green (1993), there are five ways of thinking about quality in higher education that are framed as exception, as perfection, as fitness for purpose, as value for money, and as transformation. Interpretations of quality in higher education vary depending on stakeholders' views. Among the different stakeholders, the purpose of this study was to examine students' conceptualizations of quality interpreted through the Harvey and Green (1993) quality framework. The study was qualitative thematic in its approach, and data were collected using feedback surveys. All the one hundred and eighty five first year graduate students, who were attending their coursework in 13 different fields located in eight of the 10 colleges in Addis Ababa University (AAU), filled the survey. From these respondents, a total of 283 replies were collected. Data were then thematically analyzed using percentages. The findings revealed that students define quality differently, and the term means different things even for the same student. However, their conceptualizations converge mostly around the quality as fitness for purpose category (especially as customer-determined fitness), followed by quality as exceptional (especially as excellence) and quality as transformative categories. It is recommended that AAU's quality-related effort, quality as understood by students, needs to primarily deal with refining its services and enhancing graduate employability. This has to be followed by taking care of student admission, teacher recruitment criteria, and bringing long-lasting qualitative changes on the part of students for life beyond the university.

Keywords: Defining quality; Higher education; Input; Output; Process

1. Introduction

As a result of the extensive global movement to build high-level human resource and intellectually competitive workforce (Cheng, 2016), quality in higher education has become the forefront agendum in both developing and developed countries (Samkange and Augustine, 2013; Cheng, a2017) since the 1980s (Cheng, a2016). A lot has been narrated about quality. According to Al-Maawali and Al-Siyabi (2020), quality teaching is arguably one of the most prominent higher education policy issues. Elken, Frølich, Maassen and Stensaker (2020) noted that achieving quality has always been at the heart of the academic industry. Scholars further stated that the importance of quality in the service industry has gotten the attention of many researchers (Alhazmi, 2020) and most of the goals of Education for All are affected by the quality of educators and educational contents (Madani, 2019). Despite such explanations, conceptualizing quality remained elusive and multifaceted (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, and Crawford, 2015; Cheng, a2016; Bowers, Ranganathan, and Simmonsa, 2018; Madani, 2019; Alexander, Fox, and Gutierrez, 2019; Alhazmi, 2020).

Regardless of its nature, in Ethiopia too, how many times have I read researchers' arguments complaining about and criticizing quality in higher education? Ambo, Dabi, and Chan (2021: 36) wrote, "Despite such enormous expansion of education at all levels, the quality issue is a point of public outcries…" Molla (2019: 335) claimed that "the Ethiopian HE system has faced enduring challenges in the areas of quality". Similarly, as to Shibeshi (2009: 1103-1104) "the greater push given to increasing enrolment seems to have offset the efforts made to improve the quality of education". And "The decline in education quality is very much real at all levels" (Semela, 2014: 140).

In theory, the aforementioned global claims about quality might not be controversial. Those explanations likely represent the broader consensus. But when it comes to specificities, because quality is slippery and dynamic in its nature and everyone has a different understanding of what it is (Harvey and Green, 1993; Cheng, a2016), differences arise on what has really become the forefront agenda and what is actually at the center of the academic industry. Besides, the Ethiopian writers' complaints and criticisms are tolerable as far as they are proven valid and reliable. I am writing this article neither to accept nor to reject nor to criticize those complaints. In deed there is no such an approach since "there is no consensus on the meaning of quality…" (Mohammad, Neyestani, Jafari, and Taghvaei, 2021: 68) and even it can mean different things for the same individual at different times and contexts (Cheng, a2016; Sameena, 2020). Instead, the more critical point to explore here is, about what specific issue are writers claiming or complaining? How do they understand quality in order to raise their concerns or criticisms so often? What does this mysterious word - quality- really mean?

In their attempt to answer these questions, Hardjono and van Kemenade (2021: vii) wrote, "To both of us, having been actively involved in the quality management subject in our own way over forty years, the feeling remains that we still do not have a sufficient grip on the subject". We all have an idea when we talk about quality (Bowers *et al.*, 2018) but we cannot say what it exactly is (Harvey and Green, 1993). The renowned American writer and philosopher Robert Pirsig said "Quality-you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. […] if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists?" (Pirsig, 2005: 184). Moreover, Harvey and Green (1993) likened quality to 'liberty' and 'equality'. Harvey and Green went to add that two terms best explain the nature of quality: elusiveness and relativity. This is to mean the concept does not have one correct definition and its meaning is stakeholder relative (Nabaho, Aguti, and Oonyu, 2017). Schindler *et al.* (2015) also said defining quality poses a considerable challenge because the term is elusive, multidimensional, and ever-changing.

Although the word quality originated from the Latin word *qualitas,* to mean property, character, or essence (Hardjono and van Kemenade, 2021), conceptualizations of the term remain scattered and unsystematic to some degree (Elken and Stensaker, 2020) and debatable (Cheng, 2016). In their attempt to operationalize quality, some educational institutions, for instance, focus more on enhancing

student learning than on attaining prestige (Schindler *et al.*, 2015). Besides, as to Cheng (a2017), quality should be understood more as a virtue of professional practice than viewing it as fitness for purpose or as value for money. A study by Fajčíková and Fejfarová (2019) found university students defining quality more in relation to course characteristics than instructor traits. Osman, Sohel-Uz-Zaman, Ashraf, and Uddin (2020) discovered that university students considered institutional image as an important indicator for the link between quality education and employing industries. Given these variations in conceptualizing the term, this study attempted to examine how graduate students in Addis Ababa University (AAU) define quality.

Although efforts to conceptualize quality lack analytical frameworks (Padró *et al.*, 2019), there are different strategies to approach the issue. For instance, UNICEF utilizes a more comprehensive strategy that focuses on the complexity of education and the need to adopt a broad and holistic perspective on the concept (Burušić, Babarović and Velić, 2016). There are also approaches that consider two strategies to define quality: constructing a broader definition of the term and identifying specific indicators (Schindler *et al.*, 2015). Following this approach, these scholars came up with 13 broad definitions of quality and over 50 specific indicators. Another model to define quality is called the Nordic Model of Service Quality that defines the term by using two variables: technical and functional quality (Osman *et al.*, 2020). Osman and his associates also developed their own model known as the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), a model which is composed of program quality, industrial links, and student satisfaction that can potentially affect institutional image, which in turn affects service quality. As to Tayeb (2016), quality is defined in terms of institutional status (talent, resources, and policies) and institutional global ranking. Nabaho *et al.* (2017) forwarded a three levels conception to define quality in higher education: input-level, process-level, and output-level conceptions, which they found to represent the three categories of the Harvey and Green (1993) quality framework

In this study, however, the Harvey and Green (1993) quality framework was employed. This was because, first this approach is among the original conceptualizations developed in the 1990s (Schindler *et al.*, 2015). These scholars went to add that quality conceptualizations in a number of contemporary publications are consistent with those originally developed approaches of the 1990s which make the meaning of quality in higher education remain relatively stable for at least the past 20 years. The Harvey and Green (1993) framework has also made tangible contributions to the quality discourse in higher education (Nabaho *et al.*, 2017). More importantly, according to Cheng (a2017: 153) and Cheng (a2016, p.1), "the most commonly cited definitions [of quality] are proposed by Harvey and Green (1993)".

Moreover, in recent times, many authors (Samkange and Augustine, 2013; Schindler *et al.*, 2015; Cheng, a2016; Tayeb, 2016; Liu, 2016; Burušić *et al.*, 2016; Cheng, a2017; Nabaho *et al.*, 2017; Bowers *et al.*, 2018; Padró *et al.*, 2019; Musa, 2019; Alhazmi, 2020; Elken and Stensaker, 2020; Mulder and Beer, 2020; Hardjono and van Kemenade, 2021) frequently used the Harvey and Green (1993) ways of defining quality as their theoretical frame of reference to analyze the concept and other quality-related issues in higher education institutions.

The Harvey and Green (1993) Quality Framework

This framework is a comprehensive approach that pinpoints five distinct but interrelated ways of thinking about quality in higher education institutions. The different conceptualizations in defining quality, according to the framework, can be grouped into five categories: quality as exception, quality as perfection or consistency, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformative. As these categories refer to different meanings, Harvey and Green say, to assess quality in higher education requires an understanding of each category. These understandings, as expressed in their framework, are presented as follows.

A. Quality as Exceptional

According to this category, quality refers to something special or above the ordinary. It has three variations: quality as distinctiveness, as excellence, and as conformance to required (minimum) standards. In the first two varieties, there are absolute standards that are universal whereas the standards in the third view are absolute but relative (institution-specific or non-universal thresholds).

Quality as distinctiveness is the traditional conception of quality that implies exclusivity, high class, uniqueness, and inaccessibility or something that is unattainable for most people. There are higher education institutions that have gotten global recognition. For different reasons, these institutions have developed a universal positive image and due to this, their quality is meant to be unquestionable and they are not expected to demonstrate it. Their names by themselves imply quality. This variety is blamed for being elitist. Moreover, it does not define quality and gives no definite criteria against which quality can be determined, making its application in the higher education context useless.

Quality as excellence confers with exceeding high standards. This variety is similar to quality as distinctiveness. It is different from distinctiveness since it provides a set of criteria against which quality can be judged, although the criteria are almost unattainable, or attainable only in limited circumstances. It focuses on inputs (output as a function of input, what is coming in predicts what would come out). In a further explanation to emphasize the need for the input, this variety states that an institution that takes the best students and provides them with the best resources (human and material) by its nature excels. Stated differently, when the right graduate is recruited and is provided with the right learning environment, the individual will exceed high standards. Reputation of an institution and its resources also imply quality.

Quality as conformance to standards is a diluted or weaker notion of exceptional quality and it focuses on the product. This variety states that if a product passes minimum checks that are set based on attainable operationalized criteria, then it is quality. A product that fulfills minimum (relative) benchmarks set by the producer or quality controller will pass the quality threshold. It also proclaims that quality can be improved if the standards are raised, which is a common approach in higher education. The standards set to acquire a final degree fit this view. Universities have their own standards against which student performances will be determined and graduates be entitled to get their degrees, on condition that they meet these standards. Unlike the first two varieties of the quality as exceptional category, the conformance to standards variety is criticized for not being exceptional or for not referring to something above the ordinary since the criteria it sets are minimum and institution-specific that might be ordinary.

B. Quality as Perfection or Consistency

Rather than putting the emphasis on input and output, this category focuses on the process and specifications that, after passing through the process, should be met perfectly and consistently. It involves two variations: quality as zero defects and as getting things right first time. Both variations emphasize prevention rather than inspection. A defect-free product needs a fault free process, a process that can be assessed against a set of customer specifications, not standards. The difference between specifications and standards is that while specifications represent customer needs (expectations) or what is in the customers' minds, standards are criteria that are set by somebody else. By conceptualizing excellence in terms of process and specifications rather than input and output standards, this category democratizes quality and relativizes excellence in that there are no absolutes and universal benchmarks to assess the quality of an output. Nonetheless emphasizing the process over the input and the output is against most perceptions of quality in the higher education context.

In the zero-defects variety, quality is something that conforms to a particular specification that is neither a standard nor is assessed against any standard. And this conformance is judged when the product is proven to be defect free. Exclusivity is not a requirement in the sense that everybody can have quality (inclusive). The 'special' in the 'excellence' variation of the 'quality as exceptional'

category would become the 'perfect' in 'zero defects'. A quality producer or service provider is one whose product or service is defect-free that is delivered consistently.

Quality as getting things right first time refers to a process where faults do not occur at each and every stage as everyone involved in the process of an institution is responsible for quality. This notion is what is encapsulated in quality culture. Rather than relying on final inspection to identify defects, this variety advises service providers and manufacturers to make sure that things are done right at every stage by everybody. As a result, it states, there is no need to check the quality of the final output.

C. Quality as Fitness for Purpose

This category suggests that quality will only have meaning if it is related to the purpose of the service or product. Quality is seen in terms of the extent to which the service or product fits its purpose. This is to mean that if something does the job it is designed for, then it is a quality service or product. It is inclusive in the sense that every product or service has the potential to fit its purpose, and thus to be quality. The question is whose purpose and how is fitness assessed? To answer these questions, the category provides two alternative variations: the customer's purpose and the provider's purpose.

The customer's purpose refers to a consumer-determined fitness for purpose. A quality product or service meets the specifications (needs or requirements) of the customer. These specifications or requirements reflect what the customer has in mind. The customer has requirements that become the specifications for the service, and the outcome reliably matches these requirements. And a quality product, by meeting the specifications of the customer, as well meets the requirements of the customer. This variety further states that quality requires not only meeting consumer specifications (needs) but also products have to appeal to consumers (consumer satisfaction). When this is translated into the higher education context, customer satisfaction is determined in terms of the extent to which the service and its product are consistent with student and employer expectations.

The provider's purpose variety refers to a mission-led or institution-determined fitness for purpose. The emphasis is on the institution itself, the institution fulfilling its own stated objectives or mission. It refers to the institution being able to consistently meet the standards, which it has set for itself. A high quality institution is one which clearly states its mission (or purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting it. It also represents the institution's fitness for, and performance in the market. It is all about answering the question 'has the institution consistently met the standards it has set for itself' rather than 'has the student (customer) been provided according to his/her specification' (customer's purpose). It further assumes that if the university meets its mission, then it delights or satisfies the students. As stated above, delight is judged based on the output. This means, declared levels of customer satisfaction give the evidence for quality.

D. Quality as Value for Money

This category is a populist view of quality that links quality with value, particularly value for money. This notion is reflected in many common expressions like 'quality at a price you can afford' as opposed to 'you get what you paid for'. Education systems that support this notion want to get more students into higher education with minimal extra investment or with no comparable increase in resources and effectiveness will not be compromised at the same time. To realize this, the notion puts accountability at the center of the quality assessment process. The category directly equates quality with cost and promotes the most efficient use of resources by higher education institutions. As a result, quality is judged based on the extent to which institutions optimally use resources and are effective, performing well in the market (market share). In this regard, the category argues, the market will take care of quality and institutions are left free to do whatever they can to ensure the quality of what they provide and enhance their competitiveness.

E. Quality as Transformative

This view is rooted in bringing qualitative changes (affective, cognitive, and psychomotor) that cannot be measured. It challenges the relevance of a product-based notion of quality. It has two variations: quality in terms of the extent to which the education system adds most value to students' knowledge and personal development (enhancement) and empowers them for life after graduation (empowerment).

Enhancing the participant refers to quality education resulting in change by improving the knowledge, abilities and skills of students and by adding new values to what they already possess (value-added). Although its umbrella category (quality as transformative) criticizes product-based approaches, this variety supports the notion that the value added component can still be assessed by looking at the output. Student enhancement requires the university to provide students with opportunities that will allow them to fully and actively participate in the learning process so that they will take the responsibility for creating, delivering, and evaluating the product. This puts students at the center of the evaluation and learning processes. This dual responsibility shifts the focus from enhancement to empowerment.

The empowering-the-participant variety places the emphasis on what students do to transform themselves or on giving power to students to influence their own transformation. When empowered, according to this variety, students will engage in decision-making (like owning the learning process, determining the style and mode of delivery of learning, and democratizing the instructional process) that affects their transformation. Their transformation again empowers themselves to the extent that they may select their own curriculum. It requires teaching and learning to go beyond simple acquisition and application of a body of knowledge. Critical thinking that encourages students to challenge pre-conceptions, personal or otherwise, is required. In this way, the education system is expected to transform students' conceptual ability and self-awareness.

Theoretical literatures present explanations in support of these quality conceptualizations of the Harvey and Green (1993) framework. Hardjono and van Kemenade (2021) and Joarder, Ashraf and Ratan (2020) indicated that meeting or being suitable for an intended purpose is a pragmatic interpretation of quality, especially quality as fitness for purpose. Similarly, Cheng (a2017; a2016) stated that quality as fitness for purpose and as value for money are the two most commonly used definitions of the term. According to the International Network responsible for quality assurance in Higher Education, as to Mohammad *et al.* (2021), compliance to predetermined standards and mission, goals, and expectations is what defines quality. Padró *et al.* (2019) on the other hand stressed that employability should be the focus in defining program quality. Musa (2019) noted that merit- and competence-based student admissions and the qualification level of instructors can be used as indicators for quality education in universities. Madani (2019) also asserted that teacher qualification is among a range of quality indicators in higher education.

Empirical evidences also proved different conceptualizations of quality from students' perspectives. Brown and Mazarol (2009, as cited in Alhazmi, 2020) found positive image of a university as students' means to evaluate quality education. Alhazmi (2020) discovered clean learning environment, instructor knowledge, university location, well-conditioned classroom, and library services as the first top ranked indicators of students' conceptualization of quality service in a university. In addition, Tadesse, Manathunga, and Gillies (2018) found teacher experiences, adequacy of textbooks, reference materials, laboratory equipment, and student-centeredness of methods of teaching (active learning) as the most common themes in quality teaching and learning.

In the Ethiopian context, the concepts of quality were implied in different documents and research works. Ministry of Sciences and Higher Education [MoSHE] (2021), for instance, linked issues related to the qualification of university teachers, the curriculum, and facilities to quality. However, extensive search for a similar work that examined student conceptualizations of quality, especially vis-à-vis the Harvey and Green (1993) quality framework resulted in nothing. Thus in an attempt to

fill this gap and as a contribution to the global debate on defining the term, this study addressed the following basic questions:

- How do graduate students in AAU define or conceptualize quality?
- On which category (ies) of the Harvey and Green (1993) quality framework do students focus in defining the term?

In an effort to examine their conceptualizations of quality, this study aimed at filtering the conceptualizations of graduate students in AAU through the Harvey and Green (1993) framework.

The study, did not attempt to check the appropriateness or relevance of every category or the framework as a whole to assess quality in higher education. Instead, there are key views that are stated in each category and/or variation that help to define quality and the study examined students' conceptualizations vis-à-vis these tenets.

As Harvey and Green (1993) indicated, we all have an intuitive understanding of what quality means, but we often find it difficult to clearly articulate it. By putting the Harvey and Green (1993) framework into the actual context, this paper further elaborated the five different ways of thinking about quality in higher education. These pragmatic elaborations, I believe, can expand and concretize educators' and students' as well as other stakeholders' conceptualizations of what quality really means. In this regard, Cheng (a2016) stressed that analyzing the different dimensions of quality offers critical perspectives to quality assurance implementers and policy makers. In addition, universities require student feedback detailing the quality of their academic and administrative services so that they can prioritize resource allocation and adapt their services (Alhazmi, 2020). This study can present such feedbacks to universities. Moreover, as a result of variations in defining quality, different countries and institutions implement different quality assurance tools (Alexander *et al.*, 2019). This study can offer student perspectives that can be used for preparing or revising quality assurance tools Ethiopian higher education institutions are using. Finally, there are several attempts to explain and study the quality of education at different levels in Ethiopia. But researchers struggle to find a clear conceptual frame of reference to base their works. This paper can help to address this problem.

2. Research Methods

This research is qualitative descriptive in its design. The design was chosen since the term quality by itself is qualitative (Mohammad *et al.*, 2021; Bowers *et al.*, 2018; Harvey and Green, 1993). The study was conducted on students of AAU. According to its legislation, the university has 10 colleges (AAU, 2019). For the sake of representativeness, mathematically speaking, choosing a third of these colleges could have been enough. However, in a qualitative study, the focus is not on representation but on data adequacy and/or concentration. Thus, more than half of these colleges (eight) were chosen randomly for data collection: Colleges of Business and Economics, Education and Behavioral Studies, Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism and Communication, Health Sciences, Natural and Computational Sciences, Performing and Visual Arts, Social Sciences, and Addis Ababa Institute of Technology (AAiT). As quality is a flexible concept depending on circumstances and contexts (Mohammad *et al.*, 2021; Bowers *et al.*, 2018), students in as many fields of study as possible, who are attending classes in different contexts, were included in the research. In doing so, 13 fields of study within these colleges were chosen randomly.

Interpretations of quality in higher education vary depending on stakeholder views such as that of funding bodies, taxpayers, students, employers, academics and administrators (Schindler *et al.*, 2015; Burušić *et al.*, 2016; Tayeb, 2016; Bowers *et al.*, 2018). In this study, students were used as data sources. The focus was on students since most conceptual frameworks assess quality through customer perceptions (Alhazmi, 2020). Students are among the customers of university services (Harvey and Green, 1993; Alhazmi, 2020) and "In the last analysis it is the consumer who is the arbitrator of quality…" (Sallis and Hingley, 1991: 3, cited in Harvey and Green, 1993, p. 20). They are also considered as the core when setting any educational policy that aims to ensure quality (Madani, 2019) and "as the most valuable asset in any successful higher education institutions

(HEIs)" (Asim and Kumar, 2018: 70). Besides, in many contemporary publications, there is a growing trend towards stakeholder-driven definitions of quality, including students (Schindler *et al.*, 2015) and the quality of higher education can effectively be judged by the individual who has passed through the process first hand (Bowers *et al.*, 2018). In their literature search about whose quality perception has been at the center of global research, Bowers *et al.* (2018) found that the primary focus is on students and employers as these two groups represent the users of the product and the users of the output, students and employers respectively. Thus, all first year AAU graduate students who were attending their coursework in the 2021/22 academic year in the chosen 13 fields of the eight colleges participated in the study. The participants were first year graduate students since those in their second year are writing their thesis or are doing their projects and are not accessible or are not attending classes.

Accordingly, a total of 185 first year graduate students (101 males or 54.6% and 84 females or 45.4%) participated in the study: 40 students from the college of Business and Economics, 23 from Education and Behavioral Studies, 12 from Humanities, Language Studies, Journalism and Communication, 32 from Health Sciences, 24 from Natural and Computational Sciences, 10 from Performing and Visual Arts, 19 from Social Sciences, and 25 from Addis Ababa Institute of Technology (AAiT).

Data were collected using a feedback survey as such surveys can help to collect students' expressed opinions or feedback about the services they receive as students (Alhazmi, 2020). During the 2020/21 academic year, an attempt was made to collect data by using focus-group discussions (FGDs) with students from the College of Health Sciences, AAU. However, when students were asked about how they conceptualize or define quality, only few students reflected their views and the rest were simply replying that 'they do not have a different view'. So, the FGD was dropped and, instead, feedback surveys were employed to get views from every respondent. Nine questions were included in the survey. Of these, the first five questions were used to collect respondent background information such as sex, college, and field of study. The next two questions were those that directly or indirectly raised the basic research questions and the last two questions were additional questions that have been used to further clarify the second question: students' conceptualizations of the term quality, which is the main title and the objective of the study.

Data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis technique. Five steps were followed to organize the data. The first step was to fix the themes. So the five categories of the Harvey and Green (1993) quality framework were listed as the five themes. The second step was to set the sub-themes. In doing so, the variations in each category of the framework were listed and considered as the sub-themes. This was followed by determining the key tenets in each variation (sub-theme). Tenets represented the important views that are used to explain how quality is defined in each variety. The fourth step was reading and separately listing all replies given by the respondents. At the fifth and last step every reply was grouped under the appropriate key tenet (by implication under each sub-theme and theme). A key tenet that did not have any reply under it was removed. Finally, students' responses under each sub-theme and theme were counted, translated into percentages, and content analyzed.

3. Results and Discussions

A total of 185 first year graduate students (101 males or 54.6% and 84 females or 45.4%) from 13 fields housed in eight of the 10 colleges of AAU filled the self-administered (except in two fields) feedback survey. To answer the basic question of the study (How do graduate students define quality?), first a related but less relevant question was raised: is quality in Ethiopian higher education institutions increasing, decreasing, or mixed? Of all the informants, 36 students (19.5%) said quality is increasing, 78 students (42.1%) said it is decreasing, and the remaining 71 students (38.4%) said it is mixed (increasing and decreasing).

The 'increasing', 'decreasing', and 'mixed' answers were not as such important for the study. But, the answer to this question was followed by the most important question: what do you mean by that

answer (how do you define quality to come to such a conclusion or to give such an answer? what comes to your mind when you hear the word quality?). In some face-to-face survey administration, different attempts were made to further help respondents understand this question. Among the alternative questions raised were: how have you been able to say quality is increasing or decreasing? What are your indicators to judge the quality like that? What do you mean by quality? And so on.

A total of 283 replies were obtained that show how students understand the term quality. The number of replies exceeded that of the informants since any informant was free to reflect his/her conceptualization of quality in more than one way (in terms of input, process, and output). It would have been possible to collect more than 283 replies from more informants. But, this was not necessary as the already-collected replies were found oversaturated around three categories, especially one category.

Although discussions of quality in higher education can mean virtually anything (Elken and Stensaker, 2020), in line with the title and objective of this study, qualitative data were presented and analyzed using the Harvey and Green (1993) framework. Table 1 shows the distribution of these responses.

Table 1: Responses to define quality

Quality as:		Total	%
Exceptional		75	26.5
Perfection		30	10.6
Fitness for purpose		120	42.4
Value for money		3	1.1
Transformative		55	19.4
	Total	283	100

Table 1 depicts that students' responses fell under all the five categories. However, most replies appeared under the quality as fitness for purpose category of the framework, followed by the quality as exceptional and quality as transformative categories. This finding, where quality is defined by the majority of the responses (42.4%), supports the assertion by Cheng (a2017; a2016) that, defining quality as fitness for purpose has become the most widely adopted notion in higher education.

Under the fitness for purpose category, the majority of conceptualizations revolved around two areas. On the one hand, they focused on the university's ability to achieve its own stated mission and visions (provider's purpose) and on the other hand on its services and products (graduates) (customer-determined purpose). Of these two purposes, as discussed under the third theme below, quality was understood more as the later purpose (55% of replies) than the former (45% of the replies). The implication is that the university, instead of asking itself whether or not it achieved its mission (provider's purpose, although this is also important), it has to focus more on refining its services (the efficiency of its human and material resources) and on enhancing the employability and performance of its graduates (products) (customer's purpose). Theme-based analyses below show to which specific variation (s) the replies in Table 1 belonged.

Theme 1: Quality as exceptional
This theme, as stated above, focuses on inputs and outputs whatever the processes are. Its three varieties (sub-themes) are quality as distinctive, as excellence, and as conformance to minimum (relative) standards. Since the first sub-theme does not attempt to define quality and gives no measurable criteria against which quality can be judged, it was removed from the analyses.

In the conformance to minimum standards sub-theme, the points of reference or key tenets that were used to group students' replies for the analyses were product, minimum (relative) thresholds against which a product is checked, externally-set standards, and quality in terms of fulfilling minimum

standards. The conformance to minimum standards variety (sub-theme) of the quality as exceptional category (theme) is similar to the fitness for purpose category (theme) since both focus on the output (product). The difference is that while the product meets standards set by others in the conformance to minimum (relative) standards sub-theme (quality as exceptional theme), in the fitness for purpose theme the product meets specifications (expectations, what one has in mind). Thus analyses of product-related conceptualizations were made under the fitness for purpose major theme. This was because product-related data reflect what is in the minds of students (specifications or expectations) and not externally-set standards.

So, when the quality as distinctive and as conformance to minimum standards sub-themes were removed from the quality as exceptional category (theme) for the reasons stated above, the quality as excellence sub-theme remained as the only variety for the category. The key tenets in the quality as excellence sub-theme that were used to organize students' replies for the analyses were input, output as a function of input, recruiting the right students and providing them with the right learning environment and/or resources (human and material), and reputation of an institution. In the education context, students as they enter the university are among the inputs (students' entering behavior) (Madani, 2019; Seel and Dijkstra, 2004). Moreover, suggested strategies such as teachers, the curriculum, and facilities that are organized and fed into the system to achieve the goals of the university are the resources (inputs to the process) (Schindler *et al.*, 2015; Ornstein and Hunkins, 2018; Padró *et al.*, 2019; Madani, 2019; MoSHE, 2021).

Table 1 indicates that a total of 75 replies (26.5%) were related to the quality as exceptional theme (especially to the quality as excellence sub-theme). Of these replies, four of them (5.3% for the theme) apparently associated name recognition (reputation) and ranking with quality, stating that AAU is offering quality education since "AAU is the leading university in Ethiopia", "AAiT is the second rank in Africa that means it is increasing quality of education", "In Addis Ababa University […] quality goes well", and "Private college students have good GPA without effort. In the case of Gov't University like AAU the quality is good". This result that shows students' conceptualizations of quality as institutional reputation is in line with the explanations of Bowers *et al.* (2018) in that prestige, name recognition in this regard, can be conflated with quality. The result also fits with the findings in Finland, Norway, and Spain where students were found being affected by the public image of their universities (studies respectively by Kärnä and Julin, 2015, Hanssen and Solvoll, 2015, and Navarro *et al.*, 2005, all cited in Alhazmi, 2020).

The rest 71 replies (94.7% for the theme) were conceptualizations that were related to inputs: students, teachers, the curriculum, and facilities. Among student-related positively- or negatively-stated views were: admitting "students who even can't read English language", "the motivation of students", and "commitment of students". These replies matched with the notion that admitting students who are competent and who merit programs is among the requirements for quality instruction (Musa, 2019). Positively- or negatively-stated teacher-related views included universities employ "inappropriate people", "education providers are nominated based on ethnicity", "Well-educated and mannered instructors", and "great professionals". Among the curriculum-linked responses were "Ethiopia does not have good educational curriculum", "a problematic curriculum", "a revised curriculum", and "a theory-based curriculum". And among facilities-associated conceptualizations were "Library and books" and "advanced labs". This finding that links quality conceptualizations to inputs is in line with the explanations of Tadesse *et al.* (2018), Alhazmi (2020), and MoSHE (2021) who stressed that indicators such as the experience and qualification level of teachers, the nature of the curriculum, and facilities are among the most common themes in quality teaching and learning. The finding implies that the university has to pay due attention to who should register as a student and who should be employed as a teacher.

Theme 2: Quality as perfection

Process and specifications are at the forefront of this theme. In the higher education context, as to Ornstein and Hunkins (2018), process stands for actual teaching-learning activities and procedures. This theme has two sub-themes: quality as zero defects and as getting things right the first time. In the zero defects sub-theme services and products are expected to be defect-free and such a notion is particularly applicable in the production of industry goods (Harvey and Green, 1993). Due to this applicability problem, this sub-theme was removed from the analysis.

The key tenets in this theme (by implication the quality as getting things right the first time sub-theme) that were employed to synthesize the contents in students' responses for the analyses were the process, the process consistently conforming to specifications (needs) and not to standards, there is no need to check the final output, it involves prevention than inspection, and emphasizes the process over the inputs. In line with these tenets, 30 (10.6%) negatively- or positively-stated replies were forwarded in students' attempt to clarify their conceptualization of quality including "Instructional methods", "the integration of new technology into the process", "Active learning", "methods centered around students", "Lecture", and "The evaluation system".

With the 10.7% response, the quality as perfection theme was not among the first three themes. The finding seems to support the Harvey and Green (1993) framework's assertion that the category is against most perceptions of quality. Nonetheless, the finding that some students understand quality in terms of the process (a process that meets their own specifications) corresponds with notions such as mastery of instructional methods and assessment practices are indicators of a quality process (Madani, 2019). It also coincides with the idea that quality teaching is student-centered and involves active learning that allows the participation of all students (Tadesse *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, it supports the argument by Padró *et al.* (2019: 6) that "quality better reflects what happens when an organization performs its functions" – the process.

Theme 3: Quality as fitness for purpose

'Has the customer been provided in line with its specifications' and 'has the institution consistently met the standards it has set for itself' are the two questions that are at the heart of this theme. It focuses on services and products. It has two sub-themes: customer's purpose (customer-determined fitness for purpose) and provider's purpose (institution-determined fitness for purpose).

The university is the service provider and what the university provides to students during their stay in it is the service (students as service consumers or customers to the university's service, Harvey and Green, 1993; Cheng, a2016; Asim and Kumar, 2018; Alhazmi, 2020). Students, as they graduate, will become the outputs or products of the university (Padró *et al.*, 2019) or products of the service, 'the educated' (Harvey and Green 1993), whereas employers are consumers of the product of the university (Harvey and Green 1993). Graduation and employment also indicate the status of the product (Seel and Dijkstra, 2004). Taking all these clarifications into consideration, a total of 120 replies (42.4%) were identified under this theme. Of these replies, 66 (55%) of them belonged to the customer's purpose sub-theme and the rest 54 (45%) belong to the provider's purpose sub-theme.

For the customer's purpose (customer-determined fitness) sub-theme, the key tenets that were used to synthesize the contents in students' responses for the analyses were consumer-determined specification, the service or product meets consumer (student or employer) specifications (requirements or needs, what the customer has in mind) and delights them, and quality is determined by the output, not by the process. Positively- or negatively-stated conceptualizations that were related to the service and students' levels of satisfaction included "The universities have not been ready for the increasing quantity of students", "There is lack of knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced professionals", "We are still copying and learning all the materials from the outside world while they are exploring a new one. What will we do next? We will copy their new creativity, their new formula or definition, and this will not take us anywhere", and "The curriculum needs revision". These conceptualizations match with the service quality indicators as suggested by Sameena (2020) in that

student satisfaction can be ensured by the service the university offers and that of McBrayer, Quinet, Tolman, and Fallon (2021) and Musa (2019) in that with experienced instructors, customer expectations can be met. Besides, the respondents used various features of the output to show their levels of satisfaction stating as "Embassies and international organizations are requesting Master's degrees for posts that even a high school diploma would have been enough", "Every time we need to recruit a new employee we have difficulty selecting, since the paper they hold and their preparation don't match", and "the engineering students are in many instances possessing low practical skill than that of TVET students".

With regards to the provider's purpose (Institution-determined fitness) sub-theme, the key tenets that were used as the means to synthesize responses for the analyses were: the institution meets its own goals, it meets its own mission, it delights the customer, and fitness for- and performance in the market. Students' responses that fit these tenets include "Universities just give papers […] graduates do not get jobs", "Graduated but not employed", and "Educational institutions are producing unqualified, unskilled and incompetent students". These conceptualizations corresponded with descriptions of quality where the institution is expected to ensure students that the education it offers does the job it is designed for (Padró *et al.*, 2019; Musa, 2019; Mohammad *et al.*, 2021) and satisfies them (Padró *et al.*, 2019; Joarder *et al.*, 2020). Their conceptualizations also matched with the claim that quality in professional education can be defined in terms of employability (Padró *et al.*, 2019; Elken and Stensaker, 2020; MoSHE 2021).

Theme 4: Quality as value for money
Cost effectiveness and/or greater efficiency characterize this theme. This theme has no sub-themes. Synthesis of the informants' responses was made based on three key tenets: market-determined mission, the market will take care of quality and the institutions can be left free to ensure the quality of what they provide, and market share. Accordingly there were just three replies (1.1%) that fit these tenets including "Since this time is the time of competition most of the education providers (teachers, university, schools) are making themselves to have high quality to be chosen" and "universities are working to make better themselves". Although this theme is said to represent a populist (Harvey and Green, 1993) or popular view of quality in institutions of higher learning (Cheng, a2016), students' tendency to associate quality to the cost and efficient use of resources was apparently low.

Theme 5: Quality as transformation
At the center of this theme is bringing a non-measurable qualitative change (affective, cognitive, and psychomotor) on the part of students. This can be realized in two ways. First by enhancing students' knowledge and skills and by adding new values to what they already possess (enhancement, sub-theme one). And second by transforming students' self-awareness (empowerment, sub-theme two). In order to group students' responses, key tenets of the theme were considered since there were overlapping tenets of the two sub-themes. So the key tenets of the theme were value added, qualitative changes that cannot be measured, and ultimately quality can be determined by the extent to which the education system brings long term qualitative impact (change) on the part of its output (the graduates) beyond simple acquisition of knowledge and its application.

There were 55 replies (19.4%) that corresponded to this theme. Their responses included "Mostly students do not bring attitudinal change […] reflected in their disturbing behavior", "The year of study for higher education must decrease because it is useless to spend …", "Nowadays only the year is increasing while the subjects are unnecessary or not useful", and "What we are taught in class doesn't apply in the real world. So that made me question if it was worth spending too much time studying". These conceptualizations of quality coincide with descriptions of quality by Madani (2019) in that an institution's capacity to promote the values and attitudes of students and nurture their creativity is an indicator of the transformative potential of the education it provides. They also

matched with notions such as openness to change or changeability can indicate quality (Mulder and Beer, 2020) and quality is a reflection of moral commitment (Padró *et al.*, 2019).

Generally, the analyses above indicate that informants conceptualized quality from different perspectives. The concept was even understood in more than one way by the same informant, and this was true for more than half of the respondents (283 replies were obtained from 185 respondents). This result corresponded with one of the key tenets of the quality framework employed in this study in that different people understand quality differently (Harvey and Green, 1993), and with Padró *et al.* (2019) that quality is not one-dimensional. It also matched with the conclusion of a study by Bowers *et al.* (2018), who found that there was no general consensus among participants in defining quality.

More importantly, though explanations differ, quality in the higher education context refers to the input, the teaching-learning process, and the output/outcome (Madani, 2019). And the respondents' replies were not different. The only difference, which is the finding of this study, is that their conceptualizations revolved more around one theme than the other. In this regard, students conceptualized quality mostly as fitness for purpose (especially as consumer-determined fitness for purpose sub-theme) followed by the quality as exceptional theme (especially as excellence sub-theme), and quality as transformative theme.

The finding of this study that brought the fitness for purpose category at the top of the quality conceptualizations' list coincided with the assertion that defining quality in terms of fitness for purpose is among the most prevalent approaches in higher education institutions (Harvey and Green, 1993). It also agreed with Hardjono and van Kemenade (2021), Joarder *et al.* (2020), and Cheng (a2017; a2016) that fitness for purpose is a more pragmatic and widely adopted conceptualization of quality. However, although Cheng (a2017; a2016) stated that quality as fitness for purpose and as value for money are the most widely used themes in defining quality in higher education, when the findings of this study are taken into account, this was not the case for the quality as value for money category. The study revealed that this theme was represented by the least number of respondent responses.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Quality means different things to different people. Many of us often criticize quality in higher education institutions. However, if each of us were asked to make the criticisms specific, we would likely fail to precisely articulate them. Based on the findings, the study concluded that graduate students conceptualize quality differently and quality means different things even for the same student. However, their conceptualizations apparently converge mostly around the fitness for purpose category (especially customer-determined fitness) followed by the excellence variation of the quality as perfection category, and the quality as transformative category.

Higher education quality can better be judged by those who pass through it (the students), and the primary focus to define quality in contemporary studies has become the student. Thus, based on the results and conclusion of this study, the recommendation to AAU is that, its quality-related effort, quality as understood by students, should primarily deal with refining its services and enhancing the employability and performance of its graduates (quality as customer-determined fitness for purpose). This needs to be followed by taking care of student admission and teacher recruitment criteria (quality as excellence). Besides, the third focus should be working to bring long-lasting qualitative changes on the part of students that can benefit them for life beyond the university (quality as transformation).

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