

## CASE STUDY: TENSIONS BETWEEN QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ASSURANCE



### Background

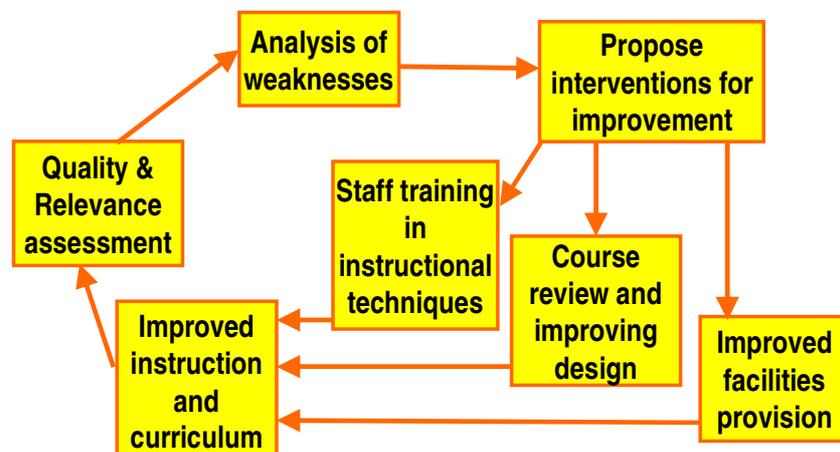
The Education Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP) is one of several Dutch projects helping develop Higher Education in Ethiopia. Over a four year period (2005-2008), its aim is to set up Academic Development and Resource Centers (ADRCs) at nine established public universities (not involved are an additional twelve new universities). Following this, ADRC-trained staff will provide upgrading opportunities to other instructors in all faculties on topics such as instructional skills, instructional technology, gender awareness, course and program design and review. The goal is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions.

The 'R' in ADRC stands for 'resources'. Both World Bank and Dutch funds have been used to create stocks of audio-visual aids such as overhead projectors, beamers, laptops, televisions and video equipment that can be loaned to academic staff to improve their classes. The ADRCs also have a networked computer laboratory for staff training and access to a digital library called eGranary which offers more than 10 million resources on HE at the touch of a button. Loaded on the server is Moodle, the course management system. In addition, various training modules have been written to introduce senior university management to the benefits of eLearning and there is also a course for instructors called "Putting your course on-line using Moodle". The nine universities are therefore poised to join the global eLearning arena.

### Quality Care v. Quality Assurance

It is premature to focus here on quality assurance in eLearning though this is an issue which will receive attention when campuses have stable LANs and better connectivity. This brief note focuses rather on the tensions between quality assurance and quality improvement and the role of our staff development centers in these issues. In design, the ADRCs are central to the quality improvement cycle (Fig 1) which is sometimes termed a 'quality care' cycle.

Figure 1. Quality care cycle



The cycle starts with quality and relevance assessment. Quality and relevant education is that which creates graduates whose training matches the needs of their chosen careers, the demands in the world of work and the national priorities. In order to remedy weaknesses in pedagogical skills or course or program design, various questionnaires have been created for students to provide feedback at the course, program and alumni levels. Such surveys are initiated in a small ADRC unit called the Quality Care Unit.

### **Audits by the National Quality Agency**

Concurrent with the EQUIP project has been the creation of a national Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (also through assistance of a Dutch project) which has started to carry out external audits in the public universities. In the absence of quality assurance and management systems, the universities have given the ADRCs' Quality Care Units a major role in conducting internal audits and the creation of self evaluation documents as a prelude to the all-important external audits. While the project has repeatedly explained that the ADRCs are staff development units, in the absence of any other 'quality unit', they now find themselves in the role of internal auditors. Thus two mutually exclusive roles have been demanded of them – both auditors and trainers. As one person put it, "one cannot be both a policeman and a friend".

Both HERQA and the EQUIP project are trying to rectify the situation by helping universities set up robust quality management systems. Quality assurance should lie with the departments, faculties and senate themselves and a separate quality unit established for audits and liaison with the external agency. Until such time, the ADRCs will endeavour to provide advice (their staff development role), but try to move audit responsibilities away from their Quality Care Units.

### **Quality and eLearning**

And what of quality in eLearning when staff begin to put their courses on-line? One can predict that the same problems that beset the ADRCs will return since they alone have been actively promoting eLearning. Will the Quality Care Unit again be pressed into a quality assurance role? – one suspects so. Perhaps it is time to look again at the names of the ADRC's units and to remove the word 'quality' once and for all from their office doors!

*Dr Mike Cantrell*

*EQUIP Coordinator*

*June 2008*