Distance Higher Education in Ethiopia: Quality of Public versus Private

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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to examine whether there is a significant difference between the quality of public and private distance higher education institutions (DHEIs) in Ethiopia as perceived by the key internal stakeholders (students and tutors). Six quality assurance criteria standards of DHE programs were used in comparing the two types of universities. Four sample universities which provide distance education program (two from each) were randomly selected from both public and private universities. A mixed research method was used. Descriptive and inferential data analysis techniques (percentage, mean, independent sample t-test, and chi-square test) were employed to analyze the quantitative data. Qualitative data were also used to triangulate data gathered through quantitative means. The study concluded that quality variation depends less on the type of distance education (DE) providers (public versus private university) and more on the competency and commitment of the staff and management of each higher education institution to implement the DE program.

Keywords: Distance Higher Education; Private Distance Higher Education Institutions; Public Distance Higher Education Institutions; Quality Assurance; Quality Education.

INTRODUCTION

In the present dynamic and competitive world, the growth and development of a nation is highly dependent on the competence of its human resources that in turn is determined by the quality of its higher education institutions (HEIs). Several factors could be accountable for quality of HEIs. Mode of delivery and type of HEIs are the two major factors emphasized in this article. *Mode of delivery* is concerned with whether the teaching and learning process of HEIs is undertaken face-to-face or in distance modality, while *type* is related to the ownership of higher education institutions (HEIs) that could be categorized as public and private HEIs. Distance delivery mode as a formal education system is relatively a recent phenomenon of the past 180 years (Holmberg, Bernath, & Busch, 2005) compared to the conventional face-to-face delivery mode. Despite the beginning of DE went back to the early 1840s, there has been a phenomenal expansion of open and distance higher education institutions (ODHEIs) during the last 70 years due to mainly the

introduction of information and communication technology (Moore, 2018). With the spread out of COVID-19 virus, recently, its use has adopted more quickly and widely at all levels of education in both developed and developing countries (Jung, 2022).

The fast change in Open and Distance Education (ODE) has resulted in multiple views of stakeholders toward the success of ODE. Some argue that ODE could achieve the purpose of cost-effectiveness, access and quality education at a time (Boogere, Akello, & Machulu, 2022; Carlsen, Holmberg, Neghina, & Owusu-Boampong, 2016) while others claim that only a certain aspect are addressed through ODE (Zuhairi, Raymundo, & Mir, 2020). But, in general, there has been a growing consensus among scholars in the field of education with regard to the advantage of employing various forms of ODL (open learning, online learning, digital learning, e-learning, blended learning etc.) in ensuring access, equity and cost-effectiveness in the milieu of HEIs (Jung, Wong, & Belawati, 2013; Kanwar, Mohee, Carr, Ortlieb, & Sukon, 2019). Despite the mentioned advantage, the ongoing expansion of ODL across the world has raised and will continue to raise concern for quality among the stakeholders especially in profit-driven private HEIs (Ayoo, Tamrat, & Kuria, 2020; Daniel, 2010).

Privatization in the higher education context is used to describe the degree to which institutional revenue comes from private (e.g., individual, foundation, or corporate), rather than public (e.g., government) sources (Morphew & Young, 2020). Private higher educations are viewed by different scholars differently. Proponents of privatization argue that private HEIs would be much more responsive than their public counterparts to demands of society and the labor market, due to their greater flexibility, entrepreneurial management and their need to ensure client's satisfaction (Correia, Amaral, & Magalhães, 2002; Lifuka, 2018). Others claim that the adoption of quality program in education was partly derived from the marketization and privatization which have been encouraged within the discourse of neoliberalism in which economic policies with a focus on competition have supported the policy making framework in the public sector (Darojat, 2018).

However, broad consensus has been reached regarding the negative impact of market policy especially in terms of school segregation (Zancajo, Fontdevila, & Verger, 2023). Most scholars tend to critique mainly profit-oriented private HEIs for compromising quality of education provision as their main motive is either profit maximization or money making (Daniel, 2010; Jung & Latchem, 2012). Thus, despite privatization of education has been encouraged by a large number of individuals and worldwide funding agencies (e.g. WB and IMF), its application requires due attention and analysis based on the context of a country to apply it, mainly in ODE delivery mode.

In the Ethiopian context, following the political change of 1991, the then new government declared to encourage privatization of economic sectors in general and that of HEIs in particular. As a result, the number of HEIs increased from two universities and 16 junior colleges in 1995 (Fayessa, 2010) to 1,906 HEIs and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions in 2022 (MoSHE, 2022). However, despite this phenomenal expansion of HEIs, quality has become a common concern of almost all stakeholders on the one hand Kahsay (2012) while limitation of resources is a critical challenge of the country in expanding HEIs on the other hand (MoSHE, 2022). The rapid enrolment expansion without increasing resources has brought progressively less qualified students into the education system of country (Yirdaw, 2016).

However, there have been multiple views among scholars about the quality of HEIs. Some contend that the general quality of higher education (both public and private) is declining due to various reasons Kahsay (2012), Beyessa (2013) and Yirdaw (2016) while others claim that predominantly quality of private distance higher education has declined (Asegu & Tafere, 2022; Lerra, 2015; Negewo, 2018). Still, others debate there are multiple variations within the private higher education institutions themselves in terms of providing quality education. For instance, Semela (2007) categorized the founders of private higher education institutions into two groups.

The first category of founders is generally composed of responsible citizens drawn from diverse sectors who are genuinely interested to contribute to the society while at the same time benefiting from their constructive engagement; whereas the second category might include those who viewed the sector like any other business meant to generate a huge amount of profit with little regard to ethical issues of higher education (Semela, 2007).

It can be inferred that most of the second category of private HEIs is likely the providers of DE, as it is supported by sound evidences. From his long international experiences in ODL, Daniel 2003, in Latchem and Jung (2009), suggested that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) could address the issue of access, equity and cost effectiveness while the issue of quality is being questioned especially in the newly created private HEIs as most of them adopt ODL and ICT either to save money or make profit. Distance higher education of Ethiopia is not exceptional.

All private HEIs regardless of the mentioned variations were required to be accredited and reaccredited while public HEIs were free from such requirements until 2022, when the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) was reestablished as Education and Training Authority (ETA). Even if, the variations in accreditations between public and private HEIs has got support of most stakeholders of HEIs; it raised some questions from the private HEIs. For instance, as to Yirdaw (2016, p. 1) “one of the quality challenges in private HEIs is a biased regulatory environment that is exhibited in the system”. Yirdaw contend that the government imposed strong control mechanisms on the private HEIs. On the other hand, Asegu and Tafere (2022) claim that quality of private distance HEIs declines due to lack of strong control of government. Such controversies could necessitate the importance of further investigation whether there is significant quality variation between public and private DHEIs provisions in the sub-sector.

This study intends to examine quality of DHEIs by comparing the provision of distance education between public and private HEIs using students’ and tutors’ views. Consequently, it aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between the quality of public and private distance higher education in terms of QA criterion standard for DH programs?
2. To what extent are the students of both public and private university satisfied with the quality of their respective universities?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Quality and quality assurance of an education system including that of HEIs is a complex and difficult concept as its definition depends on a range of factors arising from the students, the curriculum, the instructional design, technology, faculty characteristic and the like (Jung, 2022). Quality assurance of distance higher education is more complex due to the distinctive nature of

distance education when compared with the face-to-face delivery mode (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). Despite lack of universal definitions of quality in general, and that of education in particular, Harvey and Green (1993) define "quality" in higher education in five discrete but not mutually exclusive ways.

Accordingly, quality in higher education can be conceptualized: as something *exceptional* that might be viewed as (distinctive or exceeding high standard or surpassing a set of minimum standards); as *perfection* that might be viewed as (consistency of the process); *fitness for purpose* is judged in terms of (the extent to which the product or services fit its purpose); *value for money* might be viewed as (a high standard specification at reduced cost); and *transformative* might be judged as (a qualitative change in which knowledge is built with the collaboration of providers and users or students) (Harvey & Green, 1993).

As indicated in the transactional distance theory of Moore (2018) learning in DE is undertaken through effective two ways communication (dialogue) of students with their provider institutions and tutors as well as flexibility of structure that results in collaborative learning. Here, students are expected to play a big role in constructing knowledge. Thus, "quality" in this study is conceptualized as the perceived knowledge and skills change by the distance education students within this collaboration. Its effectiveness in the HEIs context is ensured through different assessment mechanisms.

Thus, *quality assurance* in HEIs is commonly defined as systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by a higher education institution or system to monitor performance and to ensure achievement of quality outputs or improved quality (Harman, Meek, Harman, & Meek, 2000). In order to monitor and ensure the achievement of quality performance and output, there should be agreed up on criterion standard and clear performance indicators.

In the higher education context, while *criterion* refers to as a set of predetermined standard for the functioning of an institution of higher education *(Mishra, 2007),standard* is defined as a measurable criterion that provides the basis for making judgments concerning the performance of an instructional activity, innovation or program (Rama, Hope, & Coomaraswamy, 2009). The key distinction between the two is whereas standard applies to any definite rule, principle, or measure established by authority, criterion may apply to anything used as a test of quality whether formulated as a rule or principle or not. In this paper, in order to minimize confusions, the term 'standard' is interchangeably used with 'criterion standard'.

Performance indicators are a set of measures that institutions, their departments and programs use to gauge or compare performance in terms of meeting its strategic or operational goals in their particular activities (Latchem, 2016); they are used by operational units, schools and departments to demonstrate the extent to which a higher education's unit is achieving the desired results (Mishra, 2007). Despite there is no universally accepted common definition of performance indicators, it is agreed that performance indicators cannot be considered 'facts' but are goal, value and context oriented, and utilized in different ways depending on the performance model being employed (Chalmers, 2007). The following six internal QA criterion standards and their performance indicators (PIs) of (Coomaraswamy & Clarke-Okah, 2009) distance higher education quality assurance model are employed to assess quality of DHEIs.

Institutional planning and management (IPM) – concerned with how the mission, policies and procedures of an institution reflect its commitment to distance learning and its initiatives. This comprises **four PIs**.

Program design and development (PDD) – focuses on how programs are designed and developed to meet the needs of learners, employers and society and to encourage access to quality education. It involves **five PIs**.

Course design and development (CDD) – indicates whether a course material clearly presents objectives and learning outcomes, content, approaches to teaching-learning and assessment and learner support. It encompasses **ten PIs.**

Learning infrastructure and resources (LIR) – discusses whether an institution has adequate and appropriate infrastructure facilities to conduct quality academic programs through distance education. It uses technological innovations in educational transactions and manages the institution in a technology enabled way for effective institutional functioning. This covers **six PIs**.

Learners support and progression (LSP) – concerned with how learners are supported by the provision of a range of opportunities for tutoring at a distance through the use of various forms of technology. Contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counseling, and the stimulation of peer support structures to facilitate their holistic progression. This consists of **eight PIs**;

Learner assessment and evaluation (LAE) – argues that assessment is an essential feature of the teaching and learning process, is properly managed, and reflects institutional and national and international standards. Evaluation is based on the stated program objectives. It comprises **ten PIs**.

These 43 performance indicators were adapted to the Ethiopian HEIs context through depth discussion with the academic staff of distance education at the university of a corresponding author. They are bench-marked for this study, because they were constructed based on different best practices and case studies of open and DE universities of various countries (Coomaraswamy & Clarke-Okah, 2009).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research Design

Mixed research method, particularly, concurrent triangulation approach was employed in conducting the study. The mixed method was selected with the assumption that the researcher collects both quantitative and qualitative data at the same time and then integrates the information in the interpretation of the overall results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). One of the purposes of this form of research is that both quantitative and qualitative research approaches, in combination, provide a better understanding of a research problem than either research approaches in isolation.

3.2. Population and Sampling Techniques

The target population of this study was students and tutors of universities offering undergraduate distance education in Ethiopia. Out of a total 45 public universities accountable to the MoSHE (2022), eight were offering undergraduate distance education courses and programs when this data was gathered. Similarly, all five private universities functioning in the country were offering

distance education courses and programs at undergraduate level around the same time. There were a total of 27,631 distance students at the 13 universities. Four sample universities (30.8%) of the entire population were selected using lottery method. While pb1 and pb2 were selected from public universities, pr1 and pr2 were selected from private universities.

The following formula of sample size determination is adopted. n=N/1+N (e)2; where, n=Sample size, N=Total population size, and e=Level of precision (marginal error). 4% level of error precision (96% confidence level) is used since 95% and above is commonly acceptable especially in survey studies. Accordingly, n=27631/1+27631 (0.04)2 => n=611 (M=384, F=227) is taken as a sample size for this study.

Both close and open-ended items were used to collect data related to the perception of students toward the quality of their respective universities.

Similarly, a questionnaire consisting of both close and open-ended items was administered to gather data from a total of 96 (M=79, F=17) tutors selected from the three universities using availability sampling technique since the number of tutors is very limited and varies based on the number of courses offered in each term. Tutors of pr2 were not included in the study because the university did not fully start the face-to-face tutorial provision after Covid-19 pandemic when the data were collected.

Semi-structured interview guides were utilized to collect relevant data from students and tutors of DE using convenient sampling technique. Voluntary tutors and students replied to the interview conducted. Accordingly, eight tutors (two participated from pb1 and Pb2 each, and four participated from pr1), while 17 students (four, five, five, and three students participated from pb1, pb2, pr1 and pr2 respectively). Most interviews especially of students were conducted through mobile call. Before asking questions, the researcher got consent of the interviewees to record their voice. Participants' name is coded to keep confidentiality in the interview conducted.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained via questionnaires were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software, version 25. Various analysis tools are employed in analyzing quantitative data. Independent sample t-test was used in comparing the quality of public and private universities in terms of the mentioned performance indicators. Five level Likert scale items (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree) are used to measure the extent to which students and tutors agree or disagree on quality of each performance indicator in their respective universities. Chi-square test was also used in analyzing the extent to which students were satisfied with the practice of DE program provision. Qualitative data gathered using open-ended items of questionnaire and interview questions were analyzed narratively and used as supplementary evidences to the quantitative data.

RESULTS

Survey data obtained through questionnaire were categorized in to two groups. Those are related to the first two criterion standards were analyzed from the tutors' perspective while the remaining four criterion standards were analyzed based on students' perceptions, assuming that tutors have adequate exposures to institutional planning and management as well as program designing and development criterion standards.

Institutional Planning and Management (IPM)

The following performance indicators were used in analyzing the quality of institutional planning and management in both public and private universities.

Table:1 *Quality of IPM as Perceived by the Tutors of Public and Private Universities*

Performance indicators	Public Universities		Private University		df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD			
Reflection of commitment to DE in institutional policies & missions	3.31	.9709	3.00	1.115	84	1.388	.169
Policies supported by procedures (training, resources & technology)	3.26	1.094	2.92	1.075	85	1.466	.146
Top managements involvement in and commitment to DE	2.87	1.122	3.13	.9055	84	-1.14	.256
Fair & attractive payment policies	2.57	1.060	3.10	1.268	85	-2.13	.036

Source: Authors' own work

As indicated in Table 1, the mean score of tutors of public and private universities were rated against four quality performance indicators. The finding showed that there is statistically significant difference between public universities' tutors mean score (M=2.57, SD=1.060 and private universities' tutors mean score M=3.10, SD=1.268, t (85) = -2.13, P=.036) on fairness and attractiveness of payment policies for tutorial and other related services in both universities. The finding indicated that public universities are rated less than the private universities in this regard. With regard to top management involvement and commitment to DE, the mean score M=2.87 of public university is less than the expected mean (3.00), implying that little attention was given to DE by the management of public universities when compared with the private ones. In this regard, a tutor from pb1 (public university) reported:

> Distance education program (DEP) has contributed a lot in improving access and widening job opportunity for those who were denied the chance to join pb1. However, since recent time, the top management wants to terminate the DEP because the fees collected from students couldn't cover the educational expenditures as the number of DE students has been declining continuously (WDS32).

Another tutor from pb2 indicated that most staff do not want to participate in tutorial activities because its preparation takes time and needs special skills yet the incentives is less attractive in comparison with the face-to-face programs (UJS25). This could imply despite the public universities are expected to be better equipped with the necessary resources to run DE, they are less appreciated by the tutors due to the minimal attention they were given by their management.

Program Design and Development (PDD)

A number of performance indicators related to this criterion standard were proposed in the guideline/toolkit. However, five performance indicators were contextualized and used to analyze the quality of program design and development.

Table: 2 *Quality of PDD as Perceived by the Tutors of Public and Private Universities*

Performance Indicators	Pub. University		Priv. University		df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD			
PDD based on needs assessment	3.46	.915	2.75	1.16	84	3.17	.002
Regular feedbacks about effectiveness of the program	2.91	1.07	2.68	1.06	85	1.00	.316
Regular revision of the program	2.93	1.04	3.00	.771	85	-.302	.763
Accessibility of the program to all learners	3.53	1.10	3.18	1.04	84	1.45	.150

meet the requirements							
Provision of clear information to the stakeholders about the program	3.28	1.09	3.73	1.03	85	-1.95	.054

Source: Authors' own work

As indicated in the table above, independent sample t-test was used to assess how the tutors of public and private universities vary in perceiving the practice of program design and development in their respective universities. The study result indicated that the mean score of public universities' tutors (M=3.46, SD=.915 is significantly greater than the mean score of private universities tutors (M=2.75, SD=1.164, t (84) = 3.179, P=.002) with regard to the practice of conducting need assessment before launching a given program of study. Regular feedback on the effectiveness of the program also tends to be lower than the expectation in both type of universities as indicated by the mean scores M=2.91 and M=2.68 of public and private universities respectively.

Course Design and Development (CDD)

The following ten quality performance indicators were used to analyze quality of course design and development for DEP.

Table: 3 *Quality of CDD as Perceived by the Students of Public and Private Universities*

Performance Indicators	Public University		Private University		df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD			
Clarity of learning outcomes	3.50	1.23	3.46	1.34	589	.252	.801
Adequacy of student's activities	3.41	1.19	3.48	1.25	587	-.491	.624
Relevancy of each activity	3.67	1.12	3.62	1.19	590	.330	.741
Schedules to address the needs of DLs	3.20	1.34	3.49	1.23	586	-2.08	.037
Appropriate technological media	2.87	1.38	3.31	1.27	586	-3.00	.003
Concern to learners' capability & needs	2.93	1.25	3.30	1.24	568	-2.64	.008
Proper structure of course contents	3.15	1.33	3.58	1.22	590	-3.10	.002
Concern to individual learner's support	3.13	1.30	3.34	1.21	585	-1.54	.123
Concern to peer support mechanisms	2.76	1.26	3.31	2.65	590	-2.00	.046
Understandability of the course content	2.92	1.26	3.53	2.65	583	-2.19	.029

Source: Authors' own work

As indicated in Table 3, there is statistically significant difference between the mean score of some four QA performance indicators as perceived by the students. In relation with how much an appropriate technological media was considered in the course design process, the mean score of private university students (M=3.31, SD=1.27 is statistically greater than the mean score of public university students (M=2.87, SD=1.38, t(586)= -3.00, p=.003). Similarly, the means score of private university students in the remaining three indicators are greater than that of public ones.

However, interview responses of tutors and students indicated that there is a significant variation within both public and private universities. For instance, a tutor of pb1 (public university) reported that any subject teacher can prepare DE materials (WDS32) while a tutor of pb2 (public university) reported that course designers are well trained on how to prepare DE materials in advance (TJS24). Likewise, most students of pr2 (private university) reported that the university is providing the best quality course materials (SSL52; BSL53; WSL51) while a staff of pr1 (private university) revealed that the university has not be able to cover the cost of raw materials

(e.g. the cost of paper, ink …) over the last few years let alone to maintain quality of the course materials (ARS41).

Learning Infrastructure and Resources (LIR)

Quality of learning infrastructure and resources has been analyzed using the following performance indicators

Table: 4 *Quality of LIR as Perceived by the Students of Public and Private Universities*

Performance Indicators	Public university		Private university		df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD			
Adequacy of physical facilities	3.06	1.29	3.24	1.30	596	-1.241	.215
Adequacy of classrooms	3.51	1.44	2.95	1.39	590	3.551	.000
Library facilities	2.56	1.33	3.08	1.34	593	-3.423	.001
Technical infrastructures (e.g. computers)	2.50	1.47	3.05	2.69	588	-1.924	.055
Clear procedures to use facilities	2.87	1.39	3.16	1.26	585	-2.043	.042
Mechanisms to evaluate the accessibility of resources	2.74	1.38	3.28	1.29	584	-3.652	.000

Source: Authors' own work

As indicated above, the mean score of public university students (M=3.51, SD=1.44, is significantly greater than that of private universities students (M=2.95, SD=1.39, t (590) = 3.551, p=.000) with regard to the adequacy of classrooms for the face-to-face tutorial sessions. On the other hand the mean score of public universities students (M=2.87, SD=1.39, is significantly less than the mean score of private university students (M=3.16, SD=1.26, t(585) = -2.043, p=.042) in relation with clarity of procedures on how to use facilities. Moreover, the mean score of new technological media especially in public universities is smaller than the expected mean (M=3).

Learner Support and Progression (LSP)

Some eight relevant performance indicators were used in analyzing the learner support and progression as shown in the Table 6 below.

Table: 5 *Quality of LSP as Perceived by the Students of Public and Private Universities*

Performance Indicators	Public university		Private university		df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD			
Support structures for self-learning	2.93	1.15	3.15	1.32	565	-1.51	.131
Multiple ways of interactions	2.51	2.29	3.10	1.34	581	-3.94	.000
Easily communicate with instructor	2.38	1.33	2.97	1.38	576	-3.87	.000
Prompt responses to questions	2.41	1.31	3.12	2.72	583	-2.51	.012
Academic advisory services	2.67	1.30	3.18	1.34	580	-3.40	.001
Adequate information of references	2.85	1.38	3.23	1.31	580	-2.54	.011
Availing materials in advances	3.43	1.35	3.19	1.40	555	1.475	.141
Availing materials both off & on-line	2.73	1.44	3.36	1.33	554	-4.12	.000

Source: Authors' own work

As indicated above, there are statistically significant differences between most quality indicators of learner support services. For instance, the mean score of public university students with regard to the presence of multiple options to interact with instructors (M=2.51, SD=2.51 is significantly smaller than the mean scores of private university students (M=3.10, SD=1.34, t(581)= -3.94, p=.000). However, interview responses of both type universities' students and tutors indicated

there is no formal counseling service in both public and private universities (LJL25; BSL53; DDL34).

Learner Assessment and Evaluation (LAE)

To analyze quality of learner assessment and evaluation in public as well as private universities, ten performance indicators were used as shown in the table below.

Table: 6 *Quality of LAE as Perceived by the Students of Public and Private Universities*

Performance Indicators	Public university		Private university		df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD			
Fairness of the assessment system	2.76	1.31	3.28	1.34	571	-3.48	.001
Time frame to return assignments	2.80	1.45	3.28	1.30	580	-3.25	.001
Written feedback to students' assignments	2.28	1.25	3.03	1.38	582	-4.98	.000
Adequate preliminary orientations	2.72	1.34	3.21	1.35	573	3.17	.002
Regular assessments and timely feedbacks	2.53	1.32	3.15	1.33	573	-4.15	.000
Promptness of grade report notifications	2.65	1.37	3.13	1.31	573	-3.24	.001
Clarity of ethics to submit assignments on time	3.18	1.39	3.48	1.21	578	-2.18	.030
Clarity on schedules for assessment	3.34	1.29	3.41	1.31	581	-.505	.614
Practices of learners' satisfaction surveys	2.75	1.40	3.13	1.35	576	-2.53	.011
Mechanisms to control exams cheating	3.08	1.51	3.32	1.38	581	-1.55	.121

Source: Authors' own work

Table 6 above indicated that there are statistically significant differences between most quality indicators of learner assessment and evaluation in favor of private university students. For instance, the mean score of written feedback to students' assignments as rated by private university students (M=3.03, SD=1.38) is significantly greater than the mean scores of public university students (M= 2.28, SD=2.28, t(582)= -4.98, p=.000). However, this is inconsistent with the interview responses of both public and private university's students and tutors (LJL25; SSL52; WDS32; WRS45) which can be summarized as public universities are better in exam preparation, administration and marking than the private ones.

Learners Satisfaction

The extent to which students of all sample universities were satisfied with the knowledge and skills they had acquired through distance education was reviewed using chi-square test as follows.

Table: 7 *Learners' Satisfaction with the Knowledge and Skills Acquired Through DEP*

Satisfaction level	Universities										χ^2
	Pr2=201		Pb2=52		Pb1=44		Pr1=211		Total=508		
	*F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Very less satisfied	9	4.5	18	34.6	8	18.2	27	12.8	62	**12.2**	47.53**
Less satisfied	64	31.8	15	28.8	17	38.6	47	22.3	143	**28.1**	
Highly satisfied	101	50.2	15	28.8	15	34.1	93	44.1	224	**44.1**	
Very highly satisfied	27	13.4	4	7.7	4	9.1	44	20.9	79	**15.6**	

**P<0.001, df=9; and *F=Frequency

Source: Authors' own work

Students were asked how much they had satisfied with the knowledge and skills acquired as a result of attending distance education program. Chi-square testing was used to compare the

satisfaction level of students of four sample universities. As indicated in Table 8, the majority of private university students, 128 (63.6%) of pr2 and 137(65%) of pr1, were satisfied with the distance education offered in their respective universities. In contrast, the result indicated that majority of the public universities students, 33(63.4) of pb2 and 25(56.8) of pb1 were less satisfied with the knowledge and skills they have acquired through distance education modality. The chi-square test result, ($\chi 2=47.53$, $p<0.001$, $df=9$) confirms that there is statistically significant difference between the satisfaction level of students of four sample universities. On the other hand, interview result of public universities students contradicts somewhat with this finding. For instance, a student of pb2 reported that:

> Currently, I am a lecturer at a public university in the field of Engineering, and I am a student of pb2 in Economics at DE program. First, I was registered at pr1 but I couldn't get any module. After two months I asked them "how can I sit for exam without reading any module?" They replied me "don't worry about it, we will consider it". Soon I decided to change my mind and registered at pb2 and received modules instantly (AJL24).

Another student from similar university said:

> I am a pharmacy student at a public university and 3rd year management student of DE program at pb2. It is impossible to expect grade without reading a module. I myself have got an F grade in mathematics. First, I didn't accept it. I have convinced after I have seen how the assignment and final exam was marked and graded (LJL25).

This might imply the satisfaction of most private university students is due to not only better administrative services received than the public university students but also due to better grades earned without much efforts than their counterparts.

DISCUSSIONS

DE managers are expected to know exactly what they should manage, how to evaluate each component of a DE program to determine and track its working patterns, whether it deviates from the set standard and what action to be taken (Rumajogee, 2002).

However, the survey result indicated that top management of some public universities did not give much attention to the DE program. This could imply quality of DE might not be the core value of top management especially in such public HEIs. It can be inferred this discrepancy occurred due to lack of commitment and competency to manage distance education programs.

Effectiveness of DHE is also determined by not only the commitment and competency of its managers, but of its faculty. In this respect, Hicks (2014) noted that as HEIs become more focused on quality agenda and accountability, there is a growing awareness of critical function played by faculty in creating, supporting, and assessing high-quality learning experiences. Thus, there is a need to ensure that all faculties are adequately prepared, motivated, and supported to carry out all aspects of academic practices including those that take place at distance. Nevertheless, the study demonstrated that most academic staffs engaged in DE duties are less motivated due to less consideration given to the sub-sector.

Performance indicators of program design and development criterion standard are utilized to assess how programs are designed and developed to meet the needs of learners, employers and

society so that to encourage access to quality education. Chaney et al. (2009), suggested that the need of the audiences (institution, faculty and students) should be well identified in developing a high quality DE program and course.

The finding result showed that public universities are somewhat at a better position than private universities in assessing the needs of stakeholders prior to launching a program of study. A previous study undertaken by Negewo (2018) showed that most need assessments focuses on market availability for business making purpose rather than fulfilling the requirements for quality education especially in private HEIs. This might strengthen an argument that most private DE programs are launched without preplanning and considering the underlying purpose of higher education including addressing the issue of quality.

The most important objectives in the design of course content is its easiness for users to understand, easy to learn, and has an interactive structure (Yildiz & Isman, 2016). Structure in DE context is concerned with proper planning of how to organize the content and instructional activities. One of the theoretical foundations of transactional distance is the flexibility of a course or program structure to address different needs of learners so that to minimize the transactional distance (Moore, 2018).

However, the study revealed that there is a considerable variation among universities in terms of course design and development. While pb2 is somewhat better than pb1 (public university) pr2 is better than pr1 (private university) in designing and developing course materials. Based on these findings, it is possible to infer that there are more individual variations than differences between public and private universities in terms of quality of course design and development.

It is widely believed that learning infrastructure and resources in DE is as important as human, financial and other related resources as it includes technological media (Jung, Wong, Li, Baigaltugs, & Belawati, 2011). Technological media are tools of interaction between the learner and tutors, learners and their peers, and learners and course content (Holmberg et al., 2005). Effectiveness of learning experience in DE could be highly affected in the absence of appropriate technological media. Whatsoever the course content may be of high quality, it will have less contribution to student learning if it does not properly reach them. In this regard, Asgedom (1999, p. 57) noted that ‘it is absolutely clear that no teaching-learning activity takes place without media’. Media according to him is referred to carrier of information from the source to the receiver or vice versa.

The study indicated that public universities are better than the private universities in terms of providing tutorial classroom facilities while private universities are in a better position in terms of implementing different mechanisms to monitor how the facilities are being used by the distance learners. Moreover, their students have relatively clear procedures for using those facilities in comparison to their counterparts in public universities.

With regard to the usage of new technological media, despite the fact that the tremendous role of technology is assumed to play in DE in this information age; the trends of DHE in the Ethiopian context is yet highly dominated by the traditional technology (e.g. print and postal technology) for the presentation of subject matter and interaction between students and tutors. Thus, it could be inferred that variations within each public or private university exceed variations between the two type universities in this term.

Learner support service is concerned with how learners are assisted by the provision of a range of opportunities for tutoring at a distance through the use of various forms of technology. It also includes mentoring, counseling, and the stimulation of peer support structures to facilitate their holistic progression (Coomaraswamy & Clarke-Okah, 2009). However, the study indicated there is less two-way interaction of students with tutors and their DE providing institutions. This finding is consistent with the local study undertaken by Lerra (2015) previously.

Learner assessment and evaluation as a criterion standard is an essential feature of the teaching and learning process that needs to be properly managed and reflects institutional, national and international standards (Coomaraswamy & Clarke-Okah, 2009). When comparing the two types of universities, there is some inconsistency between the survey result and interview reports in this criterion. In sum, there is less timely and written feedbacks on students' assignments despite the mentioned variations between the two type universities.

Student satisfaction has become an important aspect of quality of HEIs since recent years. Researchers began to approach student satisfaction as a means of evaluating the overall performance of universities (Karadag, Su, & Ergin-Kocaturk, 2021). The study showed majority of private university students (65% of pr1 and 63.6% of pr2) were satisfied with the knowledge they have acquired through DE, while most public university students i.e. (63.4% of pb2 and 56.8% of pb1) were less satisfied in this regard. On the other hand, interview responses of pr1 indicated that modules are not properly reaching most DE students on time let alone fulfilling the required quality standard.

From the earlier discussions, it is valid to infer that quality of universities varies not because of their type (private versus public); but due to variations between individual university's performance in terms of implementing DEP via committed and competent professionals in the field of distance education.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at assessing the differences between the quality of public and private distance higher educations in Ethiopia. Six internal quality assurance criteria standards along with their performance indicators were used in comparing them. It is concluded that variation of quality of DE is less influenced by the type of university (public versus private). It is more influenced by the competency and commitment of the staff (academic, administrative and technical staff) and the management of each HEI to implement the DE program.

Implications for higher education institutions

This study could provide several implications for both the HEIs and regulatory bodies, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Education and Training Authority (ETA). In a country like Ethiopia, where there is an acute resources constraint, distance education contributes a lot in offering flexible and tailored learning opportunities for those students unable to join the face-to-face learning program for various reasons. However, the study indicated that distance education offered in both public and private HEIs of Ethiopia is almost similar to the first-generation DE refers to correspondence learning. Such DE provision depends entirely on a print-based technological media for subject delivery purpose and postal service for communication. Indeed, this approach is too far from the requirements of information and digital age distance education.

Thus, the HEIs are required to think "out of the box" and consider different forms of DL - including online learning, digital learning, e-learning, virtual university as well as flexible learning such as blended learning and hybrid learning that comprises both face-to-face and DL components. The success of such distance learning could highly depend on competent and committed human power.

Hence, in order to meet the need of today's dynamic world, staff development trainings offered at HEIs level should focus on how to equip the academic staff with pedagogical and instructional design knowledge and skills integrated into online learning. Moreover, trainings offered to managers and technical/supportive staffs of HEIs need to incorporate elements used to manage and facilitate all forms of DE including open and online learning.

Furthermore, the MoE and ETA should take in to account the emerging best practices and global experiences such as African Standards and Guidelines of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA) (Initiative, 2017); in revising the QA standards of higher education in general and that of distance education programs in particular. At a time when access to learning resources is improving through different sources, creating an effective distance education system may be an economical means of building human capacity of citizens.

Funding information

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interest - There is no competing interest to declare

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