

**Harmonizing Ethiopia's Higher Education Program Accreditation Standards with the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA): Evidence from Benchmarking and Governance Assessment**

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## **Abstract**

### **Background**

Strengthening quality assurance (QA) systems is essential for improving the credibility and global recognition of higher education qualifications. Ethiopia has made significant progress in developing program accreditation standards, while continental frameworks such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) aim to harmonize QA systems across Africa.

### **Policy and Implications**

This policy brief presents findings from a national benchmarking and governance assessment conducted under the HAQAA3 Initiative. The study reveals strong conceptual alignment between Ethiopian accreditation standards and ASG-QA, alongside gaps in areas such as information management systems, academic mobility, public communication, and institutional autonomy.

### **Recommendations**

Key recommendations include adopting a phased alignment strategy, strengthening institutional data systems, improving transparency, and clarifying governance structures.

### **Conclusions**

Ethiopia's accreditation system is in a good progress of development. Strategic alignment with continental frameworks can enhance academic mobility and international recognition while maintaining national policy relevance.

### **Keywords**

Quality assurance, accreditation, ASG-QA, higher education, Ethiopia, governance, policy alignment, academic mobility

## **Introduction**

Strengthening quality assurance (QA) systems is essential for improving the credibility, comparability, and global recognition of higher education qualifications. Across Africa, efforts to harmonize QA frameworks have been led by the African Union through continental initiatives that promote academic mobility, transparency, and mutual recognition of qualifications.

The African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) provide a common continental reference framework for internal and external quality assurance systems. The framework supports alignment of national QA systems while allowing countries to adapt standards to their own institutional structures, governance arrangements, and regulatory contexts.

Ethiopia has made significant progress in strengthening quality assurance in higher education through reforms led by the Education and Training Authority and the Ministry of Education Ethiopia. The introduction of Program Accreditation Standards represents an important milestone toward improving program-level quality monitoring and accountability across higher education institutions.

Under the EU-supported HAQAA3 Initiative, Arba Minch University, in collaboration with the Education and Training Authority, conducted a national project aimed at assessing the level of alignment between Ethiopian accreditation standards and the ASG-QA framework.

The project involved four key activities:

1. Dissemination of ASG-QA principles to national stakeholders.
2. Benchmarking of Ethiopian accreditation standards against ASG-QA.
3. Assessment of governance structures across higher education institutions.
4. A national policy dialogue involving key regulatory and institutional actors.

This evidence brief summarizes the major findings and highlights policy options for strengthening alignment between Ethiopia’s national accreditation standards and continental QA frameworks.

## **Policy Outcomes and Implications**

The findings indicate that Ethiopia has established a strong and comprehensive accreditation framework aligned with many ASG-QA principles.

### **Key Policy Outcomes:**

#### **1. Strong Conceptual and Thematic Alignment**

The benchmarking exercise indicates that Ethiopia’s Generic Program Accreditation Standards demonstrate strong conceptual and thematic alignment with the internal quality assurance principles of ASG-QA.

Major areas of alignment include:

- Institutional vision, mission, and strategic objectives
- Governance and leadership structures
- Human resource management and development
- Student recruitment, admission, certification, and support services
- Design, approval, monitoring, and evaluation of academic programs
- Teaching, learning, and assessment practices
- Research and innovation
- Community engagement and societal contribution

These similarities suggest that Ethiopia has already established a comprehensive and mature academic quality assurance framework consistent with continental quality principles.

However, the benchmarking also revealed differences in the structural organization of standards between the two frameworks. While the thematic content aligns closely, the arrangement and grouping of standards differ significantly, creating challenges when comparing the frameworks directly.

## **2. Areas of Partial Alignment**

Several areas show partial alignment with ASG-QA requirements:

### **Information Management Systems (IMS)**

ASG-QA includes a dedicated standard requiring institutions to maintain integrated information management systems with clear governance and data quality mechanisms. Ethiopian standards emphasize data collection and reporting mechanisms such as self-evaluation reports but do not include an explicit institutional IMS framework.

### **Public Communication and Transparency**

ASG-QA requires systematic public dissemination of quality assurance information. Ethiopian standards reference reporting and documentation but lack explicit requirements for public QA communication platforms or accessible accreditation registries.

### **Academic Mobility and Collaboration**

ASG-QA places strong emphasis on staff and student mobility, academic exchange, and recognition of credits across institutions. Ethiopian standards mention partnerships and collaboration but provide limited operational indicators for mobility frameworks.

### **External Quality Assurance Independence**

ASG-QA highlights safeguards to ensure independence of external review processes. While Ethiopian accreditation procedures include councils, panels, and appeal mechanisms, explicit measures ensuring evaluator independence and conflict-of-interest management could be further strengthened.

### **ICT and Online Learning Support**

ASG-QA provides detailed expectations regarding digital infrastructure and open and distance learning quality assurance. Ethiopian standards include ICT infrastructure as part of institutional resources but contain fewer operational indicators for online learning quality systems.

### **3. Unique Strengths of Ethiopian Accreditation Standards**

The benchmarking exercise also identified several distinct features in the Ethiopian framework that are not explicitly detailed within ASG-QA.

These include:

- Alignment with the national qualifications framework
- Quantitative benchmarks for credits, workload, and infrastructure
- Detailed assessment and grading procedures
- Student grievance and disciplinary mechanisms
- Alumni tracer study requirements
- Staff qualification ratios and teaching workload limits
- Occupational health and safety provisions
- Community engagement indicators
- Structured program review cycles
- A formal accreditation scoring and weighting system

These elements demonstrate the operational specificity and regulatory strength of Ethiopia's accreditation framework.

### **4. Governance Structure and Autonomy Challenges**

The governance survey revealed an important structural issue affecting alignment.

ASG-QA assumes that higher education institutions have significant autonomy at institutional and program levels, including authority over financial resources and operational decisions. However, many Ethiopian higher education institutions operate under highly centralized administrative and financial structures.

Survey findings indicate that:

- Budgeting and procurement decisions are largely centralized at institutional level.
- Program-level units have limited financial and administrative authority.

- Research and community engagement planning are often coordinated at college or institutional level.
- Curriculum design and revision processes show relatively stronger program-level autonomy.

This governance structure creates tension between accreditation expectations and institutional operational realities.

## **5. Insights from the National Policy Dialogue**

A national policy dialogue held in Addis Ababa brought together representatives from regulatory agencies, universities, and government institutions to discuss the findings of the benchmarking and survey.

Key messages from stakeholders included:

- Quality assurance is fundamentally an institutional responsibility.
- Institutional autonomy must be balanced with accountability mechanisms.
- Structural reforms must be gradual and context-sensitive.
- Continental frameworks such as ASG-QA should be adapted to national contexts rather than adopted mechanically.
- Governance arrangements are influenced by national public financial management regulations.

Participants emphasized that effective implementation of quality assurance systems is more important than formal structural alignment.

### **Implications:**

These findings suggest that while Ethiopia's system is mature, targeted reforms are needed to enhance compatibility with continental QA expectations without disrupting national governance structures.

### **Actionable Recommendations**

1. **Adopt a Phased Alignment Strategy-** Gradually integrate ASG-QA elements into national accreditation standards while preserving existing strengths.
2. **Strengthen Information Management Systems-** Develop explicit standards for institutional data systems and promote digital platforms for quality monitoring.
3. **Enhance Institutional and Program Autonomy-** Clarify roles and responsibilities and explore gradual decentralization in governance.
4. **Improve Transparency and Public Communication-** Encourage publication of accreditation results and quality assurance reports.
5. **Promote Academic Mobility Frameworks-** Develop clearer guidelines for credit transfer, staff exchange, and regional collaboration.
6. **Institutionalize Continuous Policy Dialogue-** Maintain engagement among regulators, universities, and policymakers for evidence-based reform.

## **Conclusion**

Ethiopia has made substantial progress in establishing a robust higher education accreditation system aligned with international quality assurance principles. However, structural and governance differences present challenges for full alignment with ASG-QA.

A balanced, phased, and context-sensitive approach is essential to ensure that alignment enhances quality, mobility, and recognition without undermining national priorities. Continuous dialogue and incremental reform will be critical to achieving sustainable improvements.

## **Data Availability**

All data used in this policy brief are derived from benchmarking analysis, governance surveys, and national policy dialogue conducted under the HAQAA3 Initiative. Data can be made available upon reasonable request.

## **Competing Interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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