Original Research

The Abandoned Agenda: The Issue of Quality in Private Distance Education Colleges in Mertulemariam Town

Dibekulu Alem Asegu* and Matebe Tafere

Bahirdar University, Ethiopia

Abstract

This case study explores the status of quality in private distance education colleges in Mertulemariam town, Ethiopia. Employing qualitative case study design, data were collected from 13 distance education learners, and four college coordinators were selected using snowball sampling and convenience sampling, respectively. Semi-structured interview guides, observation, documents, and informal discussion/conversation were data collecting tools. The findings revealed that there was a positive perception of DE. Modules (below the expected quality) were the only instruments used to provide education. There were no sufficient support systems provided to students. The education process faced different problems, and the expected outcome was found at a lower level. The role of the government in controlling the quality of education was found low. Consequently, the private college owners were working for profit than contributing to producing qualified human resources in the world of work. In addressing these problems, the government can establish strong support and control system to assure the quality of education. The private owners of the colleges also need to provide due attention to the quality of education beyond the profit gained from the system.

Keywords: *Distance education, Private distance education, Quality education*

Introduction

Education has become the most demanded commodity for social and economic transformation in developing and developed economies (Muyinda, 2012). In doing so, the necessary knowledge, skills/competencies, and attitudes expected from any education are acquired through informal, non-formal, and formal or a combination of these forms of education of which distance education (DE) is categorised under the non-formal education (Dib, 1988; Tsegaye, 2014). However, there has been conflicting literature on when and how DE started (Kiryakova (2009). This is also seconded by others (e.g. Casey, 20008, as cited in Bozkurt, 2019) and stated that the idea of DE was developed in the nineteenth century. Its history is classified under three ages at the macro level and five generations at the micro-level (Schneider & Germann, as cited in Khan et al., 2001).

The distance mode of education is gaining momentum and becoming more popular than conventional education throughout the world (Goswami, 2013; Rena, 2007; Singh & Paliwal, 2012). Open Distance Learning (hereafter abbreviated as ODL) or Distance Education (DE) universities give access to a large number of learners who would otherwise have been unable to access education because of geographical distance or the inability to combine traditional studies with work (Malik, 2015; Sethy, 2008). In recent decades, the penetration of ICT has further promoted the open and distance learning environment and culture, which has brought about a "shift in the way we teach and learn" (Dhakal & Bhandari, 2019, p. 19). In the limited resources and relatively dense population in developing countries like Ethiopia, DE appears as a better solution to overcome the obstacles to the availability of on-campus education for the whole population (Khan et al., 2001). In connection to this, Saint (1999, p. 1) indicated that in the 21st century, the demand for multiple forms of education in Sub-Saharan Africa is increasing regardless of the quality problems.

People living in developing countries like Ethiopia and Nepal can benefit from DE (Dhakal & Bhandari, 2019; Dhakal & Pant, 2016; Knebel, 2001; Saint, 1999). Its expansion requires less cost. It can effectively reach those learners who have been denied access to tertiary education (UNESCO, 2004). It is also the most modern form of education delivery to utilise advanced technology. In Ethiopia, the number of private higher education institutions has increased from time to time since the

overthrow of the Dreg regime in 1991. This creates encourageable opportunities to address the access question for those who are not comfortable attending their education in formal public education (Nwuke, 2008). But, Nwuke underscored that the most likely immediate consequence of the increased private provision of higher education would be a decline in the signalling effect of higher education because of a fall in the average quality of higher education.

Although there seems to be less compliance regarding the benefits of DE, the attention given to quality is falling from time to time specified in the remotest DE coordinating centers like the selected site for this study. Serious challenges affecting the smooth flow of DE can be categorised as individual, instructional, and institutional related (Musingafi et al., 2015). All these factors affect the quality of education in one way or another. To that effect, identifying the status of quality education and controlling mechanisms, explicating major factors affecting the quality of education, and suggesting possible solutions were necessary, which this case study aimed to investigate in the selected private DE colleges at Martulemariam town.

Public universities had a near-monopoly in providing higher education in countries of Africa until recently. At this time, various conditions obliged governments to initiate private higher institutions to respond to the ever-changing market economy, but it is not clear if the quality and standards of education are improved as a consequence (Tefera, 2015). The number of both private and public higher education institutions is increasing in Ethiopia (Tesfaye, 2007; Wondwosen & Getnet, 2014). Recently there are about 45 public universities and more than 100 private higher institutions (labelled as colleges, university colleges, and universities by the authorised body) in Ethiopia (Tesfaye, 2007). This might positively respond to the growing population of the country that needs access to education, whereas quality is in question.

Different scholars have conducted many studies concerning education quality in both private and public higher education institutions in the context of Ethiopia, focusing on ODL and DE (Kassa, 2017; Moges, 2017; Mulatu, 2014; Tesfaye, 2007; Tsegaye, 2014). Tesfaye criticised that those private higher institutions working for the business are less responsible for quality. According to Mulatu (2014), delays in modules accompanied by poor quality preparation were problems challenging the

program. Besides, inconsistent participation and attendance of learners on the face-to-face tutorial program, lack of library, lack of guidance and counselling services and inadequacy of administrative support, a week follow-ups, support, and feedback system on the assignment and examination were identified factors in the process. Moges found out that institutional, instructional, social, psychological, and financial factors affect the quality of education. In addition to these, Kassa underscored that the rapid expansion of both the public and private education sectors are not in line with producing skilled individual graduates. Rather the opposite, underemployment and unemployment become immediate consequences of the low-quality education.

All these studies indicated that there were problems in assuring quality in the process of DE mode of instructional delivery in both private and public higher institutions. Against this background, this case study aims to explicate the status of quality in private DE colleges located at a long distance from the center of the country (Addis Ababa) and also from the region (Amhara) with less infrastructure availability. This indicates that there exists a context gap or differences with the past studies reviewed above. To this end, this case study was targeted to answer the following research questions.

1. How do distance learners and center coordinators perceive distance education provision in private colleges in Mertulemariam town?

2. What are the major challenges facing distance education colleges in Mertulemariam town in addressing quality education?

3. How do the government intervene and control the quality of education in distance education-providing colleges in Mertulemariam town?

4. What is expected from distance education colleges in Mertulemariam town to improve the quality of the provision of education?

Research Design and Methodology

This study is guided by the interpretivism research paradigm. This paradigm enables us to understand and interpret everyday happenings (events), experiences, and social structures, as well as the values people, attach to these phenomena (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Christensen et al., 2015). Because of its compatibility with the chosen paradigm and the purpose of the study, a qualitative case study design was employed.

According to Tracy (2013), the main focus of qualitative research is to understand, explain, explore, discover, and clarify situations, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and experiences of a group of people. To that effect, a qualitative case study design was chosen to understand the real practices and problems facing DE colleges.

Participants of the Study

This case study was targeted at exploring and explicating the ongoing process of DE in private colleges in Mertulemariam town. At the time of the study, there were nine private colleges in Mertulemariam town. For exploring the case, we selected only four colleges (named College A, College B, College C, and College D for the sake of anonymity and ethical purpose). Students were registered in the four centers during data collection, attending their education from term 1 to term 9 in different fields of study (management, accounting, and finance). For the exploration of data, we selected four Center Coordinators and 13 students selected using snowball and convenience sampling techniques, respectively. The sample students comprised nine (including one female) from the Management field and four (2 male and female each) from the accounting and finance field. In terms of employment status, six male and three female students were government employees, whereas four males were self-employed. None of them was unemployed. One of the coordinators was a degree holder (retired from the government job), two were diploma (10 +3) holders, and one was without any certificate.

Table 1

Sites and Participants

Name of the college	Participants (as sample)					
	Students			Center Coordinators		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
College A	3	1	4	1	-	1
College B	2	1	3	1	-	1
College C	3	-	3	1	-	1
College D	3	-	3	1	-	1
Total	11	2	13	4	-	4

Note: All center coordinators were male, and all were included in this study.

Snowball sampling was found important to select student participants for this case study for different reasons. Firstly, it was not possible to find distance learners as needed to collect data using survey items. Secondly, it was seriously not to have contact with different individuals to prevent the 'COVID 19' so limiting the samples without violating the purpose of the study to get sufficient data was mandatory.

Data Collection Instruments, Procedure, and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews, observation, documents, and informal conversational interviews were the main tools used to collect data. The interview items were structured into four major thematic areas (perception, challenges, and government intervention), containing important specifics under each of the themes. Each of the interviews has taken a minimum of 25 minutes to 1 hour according to the explanation interest of the interviewee. Regarding the documents, personal data of each college coordinator, students' enrolment data, module profiles, and other related materials (related studies and literature, books on DE) were used as much as possible. The best chosen supplementary ideas from the informal conversational interviews were included in supporting or contradicting where needed. Moreover, interviewees are coded as indicated in table 2 below for the sake of anonymity and ethical purpose.

Table 2

Codes Provided for Interviewees

SN	Interviewee	Codes
1	Students from college A (4)	SCA1, SCA2, SCA3. &SCA4
2	Students from college B (3)	SCB1, SCB2 & SCB3
3	Students from college C (3)	SCC1, SCC2 & SCC3
4	Students from college D (3)	SCD1, SCD2 & SCD3
5	Center coordinators (A, B, C, D) (4)	CCA, CCB,CCC and CCD

Results and Discussion

This section focuses on the obtained findings from interviewees, observations, documents, and informal conversational interviews supported by relevant literature. Besides, the conclusions obtained are discussed in connection with other study results to show similarities and differences.

Table 3

Major and Specific Themes Emerged From the Data

SN	Major themes	Specific points	Remark
1	Perceptions towards DE	Privatisation of education Benefits of DE over the formal education Limitations of DE	*All the responses, documents,
2	Challenging factors	Input: learning materials, tutors, technology Process: tutorial and learners support, feedback system, time of completion Output: graduates profile, employment and on-job up-grading, CGPA and performance, quality standard	and informal discussions are reported integrated based on these thematic bases.
3	Government intervention	Accreditation and reaccreditation Quality control system	

Perception of Distance Education

Perception was taken as one of the major themes considered to explore in the study. To know how students and college coordinators perceive and explain their perception in terms of education privatisation from the outset, the benefits and limitations of DE were asked in such a way "Do you think that privatising education is necessary and important? How do you perceive and explain DE?" What benefits and limitations did you observe in DE provision in your college?

Most of the interviewees responded in almost similar ways. The most repeated response was, "the government cannot address education on its own so that privatisation of education is important, but the quality of education is negatively going down".

The sample responses of two student interviewees (SCA1 & SCA4) and one coordinator CCD were stated in the following way.

SCA1 explained that

"I was employed in a government office eight years ago after I had completed grade 10. I chose to be employed in the government office at the moment because I was not able to pass to the next grade level. Unfortunately, Alpha University has started distance education in different fields of study. I received a diploma in management three years, and soon I got upgrading. Therefore, I can say that the distance education modality provided in a private college is very important for me."

ACA4 repeated the same, but she explained that

"Most of my colleagues benefited from attending DE in private colleges. I did not give that much consideration when they started their education, but now I regret it because I saw the difference in salary. That is why I am attending. Even the possible alternative to upgrade is the presence of DE colleges. The government always gives very limited chances, and also that will not be shared fairly and equally among staff. However, the quality of education in the DE system is in question; for me, it is a good chance to get access easily.

In addition to student interviewees, the College coordinator (CCD) described in the following manner:

"Privatisation of education is important in countries like Ethiopia, in which the government cannot afford populous individuals in need of education. Attending DE in private colleges is a good opportunity for government-employed individuals to upgrade themselves being in their houses. Government-employed students are happy to attend their education in this type of college without tension. But when privatisation is allowed, the government should not forget the controlling role."

To sum up the first specific theme, most of the interviewees perceived the private DE system positively regardless of the quality of education. Most interviewees assured that private colleges were an opportunity for those individuals who lack access to education in government institutions. Besides, DE is a nearby chance to attend education, particularly for government employees.

Concerning the benefits and limitations of DE, the interviewees' responses, documents, and the informal conversational interview showed the following shreds of evidence.

According to SCB3, which was also seconded by other interviewees:

"Distance education is important to attend in the nearby colleges, particularly for government-employed individuals. Most of the government-employed workers (civil servants) get upgrading through distance education. But there is no skill or knowledge change. Most distance learners focus on salary increments after completing their education. Anyone including me doesn't worry about what we know, what we do, and the like."

Another SCA2 repeated the same thing but in a surprising manner.

"If you go to every office, you can find many first degrees, even MA holders. No one knows how they attend their education. But all are waiting to upgrade themselves for every position or career. I do not know what I can say about the advantage or disadvantages of DE. I attend this distance education either to increase my salary or sometimes not to be inferior to my friends. I could say that most of my friends can say this if you were asked each of them."

Except for the words used to express both the benefit and limitations, all the interviewees repeated the same thing. The coordinators explained the issue giving more emphasis to its advantage than the limitation.

CCC is explained in the following way.

"Distance education is more important than the formal education provided in universities and colleges. The expense in the formal education system is much more than DE. People are attending their education being in their house. There is no tension because of strict exams, class attendance, and assignments. If students are active and intelligent, even if they are medium, they can score the best results. Therefore, those who are wise should attend their education in distance modality. The only limitation may be related to students' activity to complete their tasks on time."

Regarding the benefits of DE, interviewees disclosed that government-employed individuals are highly benefited from the system. They explained that individuals change their career and salary whatever they acquire the necessary knowledge, skill, and attitude as a result of their education. They did not want to cover the limitation of DE. They explained that the quality of education is below the standard. However, some individuals held their BA degree or MA; they did not have the quality expected from the level. This indicates that quality is an abandoned agenda rather, the concern for the students is to have a degree in any field they assume essential to upgrade or employ easily. The great concern for the private college owner is profoundly to get profit whatever the quality would be.

Challenges of Distance Education: Input, Process, and Outcome

Identification of the major challenges in terms of input, process, and outcome was the other objective of the study. In this regard, specific interview items and document analyses were made, including informal conversational interviews. These results are reported as follows.

Important inputs should be fulfilled to run the program effectively. To that effect, the availability of standardised learning materials, the presence of competent tutors for each of the courses, and the provision of technology-based support were based on knowing access to inputs in the colleges. The interviewees, documents, and observation showed the following results.

According to SCB1, the availability of inputs to the program was explained as follows.

"The only instrument or material is the hard copy module provided from the center. Each of the courses is prepared in the form of handouts containing exercises, short notes, checklists, and the like despite problems of clarity and completeness. All the course materials are not equally important and are of different qualities. Some modules are prepared carelessly below the standard quality. You can find unrelated content included in some course modules. The small font size, the problem of course content coverage, clarity, and binding problems are usually observed in any course material. It is not possible to think about computers or any modern technology to support the process. Tutors are from high school teachers (not better

than students); however, there are no scheduled/ programmed tutorial sessions for each course."

One of the coordinators, CCA, also described the input case in the following way.

"The basic activities in DE centers are distributing modules for distance learners, scheduling tutorials if the owner of the college permits to have tutorial classes, arranging examination time, and collecting assignments. Based on this, as a coordinator, I tried to distribute modules when students came to the center, but some students only ask modules when they were coming to the examination. Most of the time, students do not volunteer to attend tutorials, so there is still no tutorial program."

One coordinator responded a little bit different, CCB:

"Modules have quality problems, but all students are obliged to take materials on time and to attend the scheduled tutorial classes. Regarding technology, it is assumed that most students are government employees or civil servants, so they can use computers or any internet access in their own office if they are interested; otherwise, the center is not obliged to fulfil these things."

Observations in all colleges support most of the points that have been heard in the interview. In three of the colleges observed (college A, B, and D), the Administrative rooms (Coordinators' offices) are near to and side by side with mini-market shops, cafeterias, game houses, and hotels. Moreover, the rooms are narrow, occupied with much-unstructured documentation, modules covered with dust, broken chairs and dysfunctional and old computers. There was no technology access in all the sample colleges (computers, internet). There are no specific, constant rooms to attend tutorials. All colleges, including college C, use the nearby primary schools to provide tutorials, given these schools are volunteers.

Besides the observation and the interview, the informal conversation/discussion with a few individuals in working education sectors (experienced teachers) confirmed the presence of the same problem. The course materials are below standard, tutors were not of the required quality (BA degrees in related courses or some are not within the specific field of study) and assigned based on proximity with the coordinator or any else for mutual benefit, students were attending for the sake of completing each

term. The offices were not comfortable managing the program; most of the central offices were connected with shops, hotels, or business centers. There was no technology access at all (computers, internet).

It was possible to understand that inputs in the observed colleges were not sufficiently available, and as a result, the expected quality of education cannot be assured. The only hard copy modules accompanied with serious quality problems in preparation cannot be sufficient to assure the expected quality in the system. All these were observed challenges concerning inputs in the selected coordinating centers with almost equal magnitude.

The process of teaching and learning was another aspect of the interview. To that effect, its delivery methods, and tools, the practice of providing a programed tutorial for each course and learner's support system, feedback mechanisms, and time of completion of each term were asked to the interviewees to know the details in the process of education.

Most student interviewees (particularly SCA3, SCC1, SCD1, SCD2, and SCD3) reacted in a similar way. The following is quoted from SCD3:

"No one bothers about the knowledge, skills, or attitude obtained from the courses rather upgrading the career level and the salary increment after certification is the need reflected from most students. Assignments are copied from others if one or two of the students worked on it or by paying for anybody who is working for a business. Quality is not a serious matter for the student and the private owner. The students wanted to complete and the private owner wanted to get money on time. The process of education is simply taking modules from the center and if possible preparing themselves for examinations. There is no strict and serious follow up throughout the process. There seems less accountability in terms of controlling the quality of education in the system."

SCC2 also repeats the same but the following is what he added to the former SCD3.

"I have not seen any feedback system for students. We submit assignments together (the same response, the same handwriting) completed by anybody. Examinations

are less controlled (somebody can take the exam for others). Students can refer their modules in the examination."

Similarly, CCB also repeats what has been said by some student interviewees.

"Most of the students only want to get the degree or diploma that is why the quality becomes lower and lower reaching to this stage. If you control strictly, students and also the owner of the college (getting the profit) could not accept it. It is difficult to decide what to choose (quality or money). No one listens to you or the government."

Through the informal discussion/ conversation and observation, the following was listened to and observed.

It was time that schools were closed because of the CORONA virus. A lot was listened from individuals regarding interrupted education. Surprisingly, most of the reflected ideas were the poor quality of education and there is no difference whether schools are closed or open. What would be the quality of education in the DE providing colleges in these conditions? The personal opinions reflected during the informal discussion by default concluded that quality education seemed neglected at all.

Besides, in an intentional observation in college A, it was observed that an individual who is not a student in the college was copying an assignment from another student to submit it for another student. Surprisingly the coordinator was with him providing all assignment papers submitted by other students to be copied by that person. All the submitted assignments were almost the same copy from the same source. This seems the usual practice that all the colleges might share with slight differences among them.

Regarding the status of graduates' profile, employment, and on a job upgrading, CGPA, and performances and quality aspects expected from each of the programs were also asked the interviewees. Most interviewees focused on what they are expecting after completion of the program (that is, upgrading and salary increment) rather than their specific profile quality, performance, or academic achievement. To mention some of the responses:

SCC3 responded as follows.

"There is no problem knowing what is expected at the end of the program. Everyone knows what type of academic degree will be received at the end. I want to score high CGPA in the end. Albeit, the only target I inspired after completion is the salary at any expense. This is what is happening in every office. If anyone (the individual or the government) wanted to change the education system should be seen critically. I want to tell you that many individuals received their degree/ diploma without anything simply paying money for private colleges. It is the time that forged academic certificates are sold at the maximum rate."

CCD, CCA as well as CCB expressed the expected outcome from the program similarly. To show what they explained CCD expressed his feeling in the following way.

"It is already known that producing competent graduates who are equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitude that enable them to perform their task is the vision of every educational institution including this college. I think everyone can understand this very well. Of course, the competence of graduates from the DE programs might not be the same as from the formal education system. But the the job experience of DE learners can compensate for what is missed from formal learning. Most of the time it depends on the activity of the learner to determine the quality of the outcome. Anyways, employability, salary increment, and upgrading are immediate outcomes in which graduates are expecting."

From these explanations of interviewees, quality is found the neglected agenda that has been getting less attention in the minds of students and coordinators in the selected college. All the informal discussions also ensured that getting certificates and as a result, being upgraded and getting better salaries is the final aim rather than being competent in the actual workplace. Graduated individuals from similar programs and who get upgrading are showing the same performances in their actual jobs.

Role and Intervention of the Government in the Process of Education

The third important theme was focused on government intervention and role to control quality and related issues and interviewees were asked to explain to what extent the government is accomplishing its role. All the interviewed students explained using the same word, that is, we do not know whether the government is intervening or not.

SCB2 statements are quoted as follows.

"In the first place, I only know the college gets accreditation from the government to provide a specific program in the college. I heard that some colleges are providing education without getting this accreditation. This might not good for students in the end. Regarding quality controlling issues I never see any government body observing any college or program."

College coordinators also described their views regarding the role of the government. They believe that the role of the government is irreplaceable to control the quality of education. They also expressed in common that if every individual allowed opening colleges everywhere for business purposes the present bad quality of education will become the worst. Thus the government must put its maximum effort to improve the quality of education.

The interviewee CCC explained that

"The role the government must go beyond providing accreditation. Serious follow upping are mandatory. Everyone is buying degrees from anywhere and in this condition how qualified human power can be expected. Even if we are providing accredited courses for students the process we are following is not controlled by the government. There are also inconsistencies in the control of different private colleges. No uniformity at all."

Informal discussions, as well as the observation made in the colleges, showed what has been said by individual interviewees. Most informally interviewed individuals said that "today quality of education is already dead". Education is left without attention except for pseudo usual talks.

Consistently the observation held in all colleges confirms that the role of the government to control and support the education system seemed very low or none at all. If the government was involved in the system no one can find an education room surrounded by casinos, hotels, and any disturbing conditions. Besides, the government will not provide the license to that specific college if a true intervention was exercised.

Discussion

The perception of participants' towards DE and open learning modality was found positive. In this regard, participants suggested similar idea that DE is important in expanding access to education in all countries in particular for developing countries like Ethiopia to address and achieve the motto 'Education for All' that cannot be achieved by the lone responsibilities vested on government through the provisions formal forms of education. Currently, DE and ODL are the most widely used education delivery mechanisms though out the world. There is no doubt to understand and explain the benefits and limitations of DE provided through private colleges among participants without some differences during explanation and a type of personal bias not to tell the reality.

Concerning the benefits of DE and ODL Marr (2018), explained multiple advantages for learners. Learning can be engaged both synchronously and asynchronously, offering flexibility for those who cannot attend a face-to-face session due to work commitments, caring responsibilities, or disability. An empirical study by Mashhour (2007) also showed that DE is offering a viable and satisfactory alternative to those who cannot enroll in regular residential education. This is also consistent with the findindgs reparted by Fidalgo et al. (2020) stated in a such a way that "students were somewhat apprehensive manyindicated they were interested in taking DE courses'. However, DE is found important if necessary conditions are fulfilled and kept confidential. In consistent with this, participants also suggested that controlling quality of education by any responsible body, the government taking the lions share need to be number one concern to produce the necessary skilled, competent and employable human capital. Students also should work hard to pass through all the challenges and acquire the necessary knowledge and skill that can make them efficient and effective in the world of work.

Challenges disturbing the process of DE are categorised in terms of inputs, process, and outcomes and all participants react for all of the three factors. There were problems of availability of sufficient and standardised input (modules, tutors, technology) identified by this study. The process of teaching was highly affected by poor quality management, loose coordination of tutorial sessions, uncontrolled examinations process, poor feedback, and students' support system. The expected

outcomes explained were salary increment and upgrading, the quality seems not a concern for both the students and private college owners and coordinators. In consistent with this, Mulatu (2014) found that substandard tutorial programs, less commitment of stakeholders to

realise the DL program, inadequate module preparation among the cahllenges facing the process of DE in private higher institutions in South Ethiopia. Besides, in a study by Musingafi et al. (2015) the most reported challenges were lack of sufficient time for study, difficulties in access and use of ICT, ineffective feedback and lack of study materials.

The Ethiopian Education road map (2018-2030) put DE into consideration as an important option to access higher education at large. Opening Ethiopian Open Universities and expanding continuing and DE is set as a future direction for the growing demands of education in society. But the current DE provided in private as well as in public is criticised for poor quality (MoE, 2018) as that of other forms of education.

A study in India on challenges and prospects of DE by Panchabakesan (2011) found out that lack of student coordination, conducting examinations, publishing results and other related problems were critical. Delayed feedback of assignments and release of the end-of-semester examination results, absence of information for courses of study, poor communication between the center and departments, and poor remuneration for lecturers were also identified by another study (Chawinga & Zozie, 2016). In our context, Wondwosen and Getnet (2014), identified four challenges observed in private higher education institutions related to government regulations and support, and issues of legitimacy and funding. Similarly, Yirdaw (2016) found out that private institutions were continuously challenged to balance government requirements and stakeholder demands in an environment where underfunding, scarcity of qualified instructors, poor infrastructure, poorly qualified students, and a biased regulatory environment are being exhibited.

The intervention of the government in private colleges was found poor. The government only gives accreditation to private colleges. Even the controlling process is not consistent and balanced. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2007), in many developing countries the state lacks credibility with

local or foreign private sectors, especially where commitments over time are concerned.   This implies the role of the government becomes less and less which will have an impact on the quality of education and other aspects.

Based on the problems identified participants to suggest their views for future improvements. The role of the government in controlling the quality of education should be strengthened at a maximum expense. Selling degrees for business cannot be the only interest that private owners targeted on top of everything. The overall development of the country will be highly declined if this type of educational process continues forever. Individuals who pass through the process do not want to get the false benefit of education (getting false degrees) rather the right quality education to produce competent and capable individuals should be promoted at the end.

Studies from the abroad and in our context suggested mechanisms of improving DE to be benefited from the system. Mashhour (2007) suggested that the regular and the current form of DE could be enhanced by the use of modern information technology. According to Malik (2015), the over the process of DE can be improved through bringing quality in the curriculum and instruction, providing students quality support services, adopting multiple ways of assessment of distance students, developing a code of ethics for DE faculty members and students, provision of quality infrastructure and technology, launching courses of DE only through approval of National Accreditation Council for Distance Education (NACDE) and taking measures of check at every delivery system of DE courses through quality control agencies. Developing better quality assurance procedures and introducing changes in pedagogical practice was also suggested for the improvement of DE in a study conducted in Finland and UK (Monk & Hitchen, 2005). An apex body to monitor the distance education system is extremely desirable and urgently needed (Goswami, 2013).

Conclusions

Education without the concern for quality is nothing. Learners attending their education in any form of educational modality should get the required knowledge, skill, and competencies to prepare themselves for the world of work. The issue of quality in education can never be compromised with access to education. To that

effect, this study was aimed to explore the status of quality in the DE providing colleges. With this, the following concluding remarks are forwarded.

Perception towards some action, situation, or any activity might influence positively or negatively. In this regard, it was found that participants perceived DE can benefit individuals who lack formal education regardless of the expected limitations of the system, and this can be a good benchmark to make further improvements in the process of DE. However, there are critical problems related to input, process, and outcome that affect the quality of DE. That is why quality is considered an abandoned agenda from the outset in the DE providing colleges in the selected study site. So, the process of DE education needs serious attention to meet the expected quality issues.

Privatisation of education can give access to individuals to attend their education easily. But, the government of the country (i.e. ministry of education) should control the process of education. In this regard, the government is not playing the expected role to control the quality of education in private DE providing institutions. Hence, controlling the quality of education provided in distance modality should be a critical agenda for distance learners, the private owners, the government, and beneficiaries of the output from the system.

Currently, technology-assisted learning becomes a worldwide exercise and in turn, it is found important to enhance students learning on a distance basis. But, the DE provided in the selected colleges was not supported with modern technology rather only relied on printed modules with poor quality. Therefore, technology-assisted DE modality should be encouraged (e-learning, mobile learning) to support students learning and in turn to improve the quality of education.

Providing education through different forms has its strengths and limitations. Even formal education under the control of the government has the problem of addressing quality issues. Quality becomes the word only found in policy statements, public sayings, and official reports for its own sake. It is almost abandoned or forgotten and left aside when it comes to implementation. It is not a matter of being non-formal or formal or informal education to pass through. Quality requires commitment, strengths of participants, and leaders, as well as continuous, follow-up

In the end, based on the conclusions made the following possible implications are suggested .

- Accessing education through non-formal (DE and ODL) forms has no problem by itself. It is acceptable and the most chosen opportunity for self-learners, the government employed workers, and unemployed individuals so that there is a need to expand the system in advance. But, the controlling mechanism by the government and private owners need to be improved get due attention.

- The private owners and the government can create legal partnerships and work together for the benefit of the country at large. The quality of education should not be compromised rather it must be mandatory agenda. The government seems not to take the responsibility of managing and controlling private colleges. Thus, it seems critical to handle the process thoroughly.

- Exit exams and competence tests can be used to check students' abilities at the end of every term and semester or the program. The government may take this responsibility in collaboration with the private owners. This will have an impact to realise of quality indiactors at least in some aspects.

- Quality learning materials, effective students' support systems, and accessibility of technology-based learning facilities can be exercised and practiced in a wider range. Supporting the sytem of education with supplementary learning opportunities can enahce the quality of education.

- Field surveys, customer need assessments, public hearings may be done on both the government and the private owners' side to assess the process and to take immediate improvement actions. Thus, collecting reliable and valid ievedence form the benficialries will have irreplaceable importance to improve the program.

- Actions need to be taken on ineffective private DE colleges either by closing them legally or taking corrective measures to assure quality. Thus, any responsible body could act accordingly.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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