



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Action research practices, challenges and quality implications

Firdissa Jebessa Aga *

Institute of Educational Research, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia.

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2024, 24(02), 1184–1192

Publication history: Received on 30 September 2024; revised on 10 November 2024; accepted on 12 November 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.24.2.3426>

Abstract

This study dealt with investigating the existing practices and challenges to sustain quality of education through action research at the College of Education and Behavioral Studies (CEBS) of the Addis Ababa University (AAU). Data were collected from 76 staffs and 194 students at the College using questionnaires and by conducting interviews with 5 and 3 officials at the Ministry of Education and at AAU respectively. The findings have shown that teaching staffs at AAU conduct action research only to a limited extent. This was regardless of the widespread belief in the positive effects of action research to enhance education quality. Among the reasons for this were lack of staff empowerment, support, clear policies to link teaching with research, top-down prescriptions and staff members' low commitment and conviction to assertively strive to improve their professional practices through action research which is entrusted with sustaining quality.

Keywords: Education Quality; Action Research; Practices; Addis Ababa University

1. Introduction

The demands for accountability and efficiency in today's volatile and competitive world put pressures on educational institutions to take quality seriously more than ever before. At the heart of universities' missions lies learning quality of the students which implies that teaching staffs are the key work forces. Quality can only be assured by those who are responsible for the quality: the staff and the students and consequently, quality shouldn't be left to outsiders (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The internal workforce in an institution should be empowered as "institutions with a strong capacity for self-study will be better placed to meet the quality assurance requirements, whether internal or external, and also to improve their own practice" (Watson & Maddison, 2005). Empowering the staff in turn demands of them to flexibly learn their own practices and challenges, to ask themselves whether they are working in their direction of values, and to be initiators and the prime-audience of evaluation aimed at improvement (Scheerens, Glas, & Thomas, 2003). In other terms, the initiatives for quality care and its sustenance should be from within the higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves as imposed change is unlikely to enhance the learning process (Lomax, 1996). This demands of a university leadership to make staff members the point of departure for change; which implies enabling and putting them into commitment to achieve the highest possible level through action research to question, improve, modify, clarify, and change for the better.

Action research is a process in which teachers investigate teaching and learning so as to improve their own and their students' learning (Verster, nd). This calls for informed practice through self-study in which case the professionals that carry out the program or core-service initiate the evaluation and take the responsibility for the evaluation and evaluation results of their organization (Scheerens & Hendriks, 2002). Particularly, teacher educators in Ethiopian HEIs are required to practice action research to sustain quality.

* Corresponding author: Firdissa Jebessa Aga ORCID: 0000-0001-6602-9541

Over the years, many definitions of action research and comparative discussions of its relationship to similar forms of research such as reflective practice and exploratory teaching have been documented (Rainey, 2000). Many of the meanings tend to view action research as an approach oriented toward the enhancement of classroom practice. A classic definition of action research views it as a form of collaborative or self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr & Kemmis, 1986: 162 in Smith, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

One of the main objectives of HEIs in Ethiopia is to produce skilled manpower in quantity and quality that will serve the country in different professions (FDRE, 2019, 2009). The same sources further affirm that one of the objectives of higher education (HE) is to lay down an institutional system that ensures the accountability of the institutions. In the same vein, MOE (2010) indicates that the goal for higher education is to develop highly qualified, motivated and innovative human resources and produce and transfer advanced and relevant knowledge for socio-economic development and poverty reduction with a view to turning Ethiopia into a middle-income country by the year 2025.

Consequently, investment in HE is decisive for socio-economic development of the country. Particularly, good quality higher education is a basis for producing decisive workforce. The establishment of effective quality assurance capacity at the national and institutional level is envisaged critical to meeting the objectives of Ethiopia's HE reform programs (World Bank, 2003: 61). The government had established a *Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency* (HERQA), which has currently been changed to Education and Training Authority (ETA) as an autonomous organ having its own legal entity with the objective of supervising the relevance and quality of HE offered in all institutions in the country based on the powers and duties vested in it through stipulation in the HE proclamation No. 351/2003 Article 82. At each of the public universities in the country, also Quality directorate offices have been put in place to continuously work on maintaining quality, and to collaborate with HERQA/ETA in developing guidelines, procedures and subject benchmark statements for quality assessment and enhancement.

1.1. The problem

Current HE landscape demands building bridges between teaching and research by empowering the teachers to be critical thinkers, originators, and responsible practitioners for their professional decisions following action research approach. Action research brings together *research* and *action*, the *researcher* and the *actor* with the purpose of enhancing education quality and learning through empowered, informed, motivated, and committed teachers.

There is, however, a doubt to find empowered and committed teachers with profound knowledge of the art and craft of action research. This could be due to low or no deliberate efforts by universities to link teaching and research by empowering teachers to cross-fertilize the two. As *the data for human science research are human experiences* (Van Manen, 1990), my experiences as a student; a teacher at secondary schools, Teacher Training Institutes (TTIs), College of Teacher Education (CTEs), and AAU; and my participation in Higher Diploma Program (HDP) as Tutee, Tutor, and Leader at AAU have given me solid experiences that there remains a long journey in terms of linking research and teaching to enhance quality education.

Equally, the recent upturn in Ethiopian HEIs' enrollment, however, is accompanied by concerns about threats to quality and standards. The World Bank (2003) indicates that three points of information combine to raise the possibility that educational quality is at risk in Ethiopian HEIs. First, expenditures per student have contracted. Second, the proportion of senior academic staff with doctoral degrees has been weakened within the system. Third, rapid enrollment expansion is inevitably bringing progressively less prepared students into the system. Though currently there are significant changes, a comparison of Ethiopian HEIs with Sub-Saharan African Countries shows that Ethiopia is lagging behind in its educational inputs, which further confirms the deteriorating quality and standard. In the year 2001/2, whereas educational expenditure in Ethiopia was 16.8%, it was 20-25% in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the same year, whereas annual recurrent expenditure per university student in Ethiopia was US \$ 671, it was US \$ 1500 in Sub-Sahara African Countries when student welfare subsidies were excluded (World Bank, 2003).

The objective of this study was, therefore, to investigate the existing practices and challenges to sustain quality through action research taking the College of Education and Behavioral Studies of the Addis Ababa University (AAU) as a case. The rationale for taking AAU is due to the fact that it is the oldest (founded in 1950) and the largest research University constituting nearly 90% of the country's capacity to provide post-graduate education. Ideally, investigating the issue under discussion at all the Colleges, faculties, schools and Institutes at AAU and at all the rest HEIs in the country could give an accurate picture of the practices, challenges and prospects sought. Practically, however, this was beyond reality. Prime focus was given to staff-related practices, and challenges to do and/ or not to do action research.

1.2. Research Questions

With the purpose to address the concerns raised above in the 'Problem' subsection, and to achieve the objective cited above, the study tried to find answers to the following questions:

- How do staffs and students perceive the extent to which action research can make a difference in sustaining quality of teaching-learning at AAU?
- How often do the academic staffs at the College actually practice (if at all) action research to improve quality and standard of their work?
- To what extent are practitioners encouraged to be engaged in researching their own classroom practices at the College?

1.3. The Research Design and Methodology

The study employed a mix of case study and purposive survey design. Whereas the study place was a case, a mix of qualitative and quantitative data was collected from purposively selected sources using questionnaires and interviews. The procedures were augmented with extensive document reviews, and personal experiences and reflections in selecting data sources, in developing and using instruments for the data collection, and in analyzing the data.

The primary data sources of the study constitute 122 staffs at the CEBS. Moreover, 210 students were selected using random sampling from each of the departments of the College. Two sorts of questionnaires were developed and dispatched: one for the academic staff members, and the other for the students. Ninety-two percent (92%) of the students (194) and 62% of the staffs (76) returned the properly filled copies of the questionnaires. Interviews with three staffs from the central leadership of the University and five Officials from the Ministry of Education (MOE) in charge of HE and educational quality were conducted as well. The rationale behind this was to crosscheck some issues related to policy and practice.

The items of the questionnaires of the staffs started with general background information (qualification, work experience and teaching) followed by soliciting information about their belief in the usefulness of action research for sustaining quality of teaching and learning at the university. The same question was also included in that of the student questionnaire. Staffs were further asked to rate the frequency of their doing action research to improve quality. In addition both staff and students were asked to rate how often instructors were engaged in a range of specified action research activities (e.g. examine the needs and progress of their students, examine the adequacy of their content knowledge, review the currency of their course contents). In order to address the third research question staffs were asked to express in how far they felt encouraged by the College to engage in researching their own classroom practices. The findings have been presented by means of descriptive Table and Figures

2. Results and discussion

Whereas 122 and 210 questionnaires were dispatched to staffs and students, 76 (62%) and 194 (92%) were properly filled and returned from the staffs and the students respectively.

2.1. Background information

With the purpose to gauge the respondents' background, data were collected on their level of education, years of service at HEIs, and teaching load per week. Table 1 shows basic background information of the respondents.

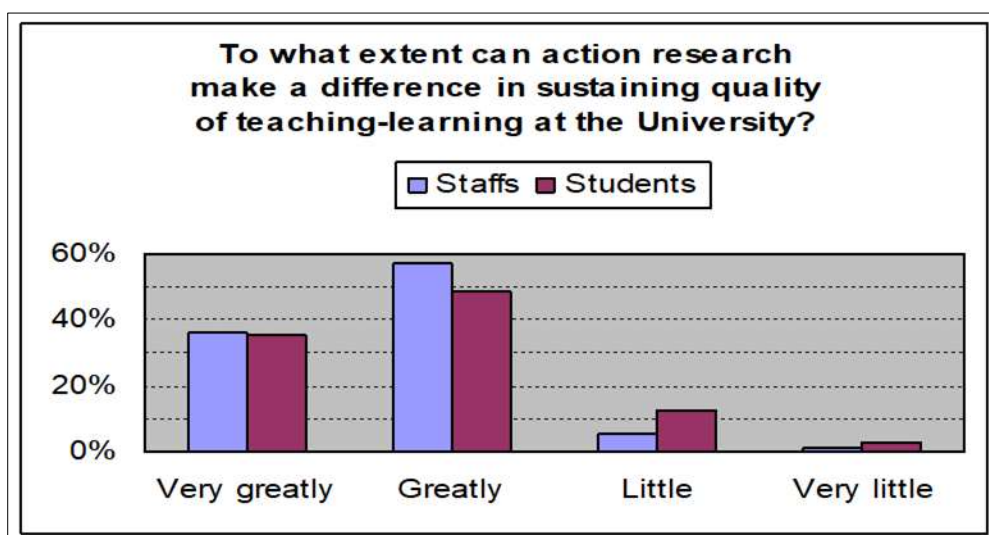
As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of the respondents had doctorate degree (63%) followed by master's degree (30%) qualification, whereas 5(7%) were missing. It can further be depicted that 40% of the staff respondents had 16-20 years of services. This shows that the College is staffed mostly by senior staffs. The Table also shows that the 46% of the staff had a teaching load of 9-12 per week. Those who had this load might not have time to engage into researching their practices.

Table 1 Background information teaching staff (n=76)

Level of education		Years of service at HEIs		Teaching load per week	
		1-5 years	3%	5-8 hours	25%
Masters degree	30%	6-10 years	16%	9-12 hours	46%
Doctorate degree	63%	11-15 years	21%	13-16 hours	8%
Missing	7%	16-20 years	40%	Above 16 hours	17%
		Above 20 years	15%	Missing	4%
		Missing	7%		

2.2. Perceptions of Respondents as to the extent action research can make a difference

Staffs and students were asked to rate the extent to which action research could make a difference in sustaining quality and standard of teaching-learning at the University. A comparison of their responses has been presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1** Perceptions of staffs and students

As can be seen from Figure 1, almost 60% and 45% of the staff and student respondents rated the extent to which action research can make a difference in sustaining quality of teaching and learning at the University as *Greatly*. Seen from macro point of view, almost all the respondents expressed their strong beliefs that action research is important to improve educational practices, as 93% of the staffs 84% of the students rated that the extent to which action research can make a difference in sustaining the quality of teaching-learning as “greatly” or “very greatly”. Similar questions were presented in the interviews with the MOE officials and the staff from the University’s central leadership. They also supported the idea that action research could make a difference in sustaining quality.

2.3. Frequency of action research practices by staffs

Requested to indicate how often they actually do action research to improve quality and standard of their work, 63% of the staff respondents indicated that they do it “sometimes” and 29% reported that they did not do at all. In addition both staff and students were asked to rate how often instructors were engaged in a range of specified action research activities. The results are reported in Figure 2.

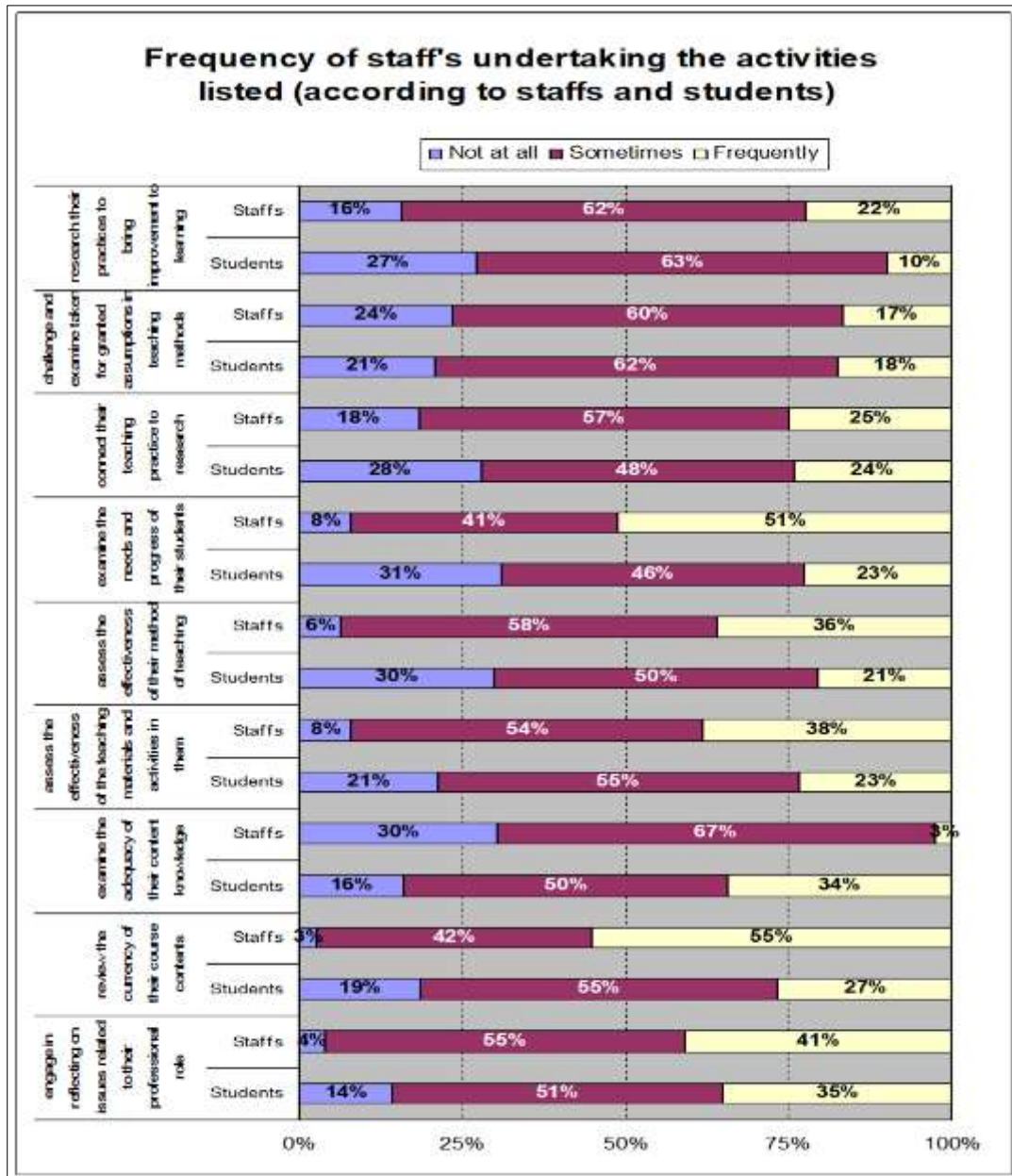


Figure 2 Frequency of action research activities by staffs

It can be depicted from Figure 2 that both types of respondents overall indicated that the teaching staffs undertake the activities indicated “sometimes”. The majority of the staffs, nonetheless, reported that they frequently “examine the needs and progress of their students” and “review the currency of their course contents”. In all other cases less than half of the respondents reported that the staffs undertake the activities frequently. In general, the students reported that the teaching staffs do not undertake the activities at all. The clearest exception to this general pattern relates to “examine the needs and progress of their students”. Over 30% of the staffs reported that they do not do this at all, whereas less than 16% of the students indicated that the staffs do not do this at all.

2.4. Encouragement for action research

Teaching staffs were asked to rate to what extent they were encouraged by the College of Education and Behavioral Studies to undertake a number of specified action research activities (see Figure 3 below).

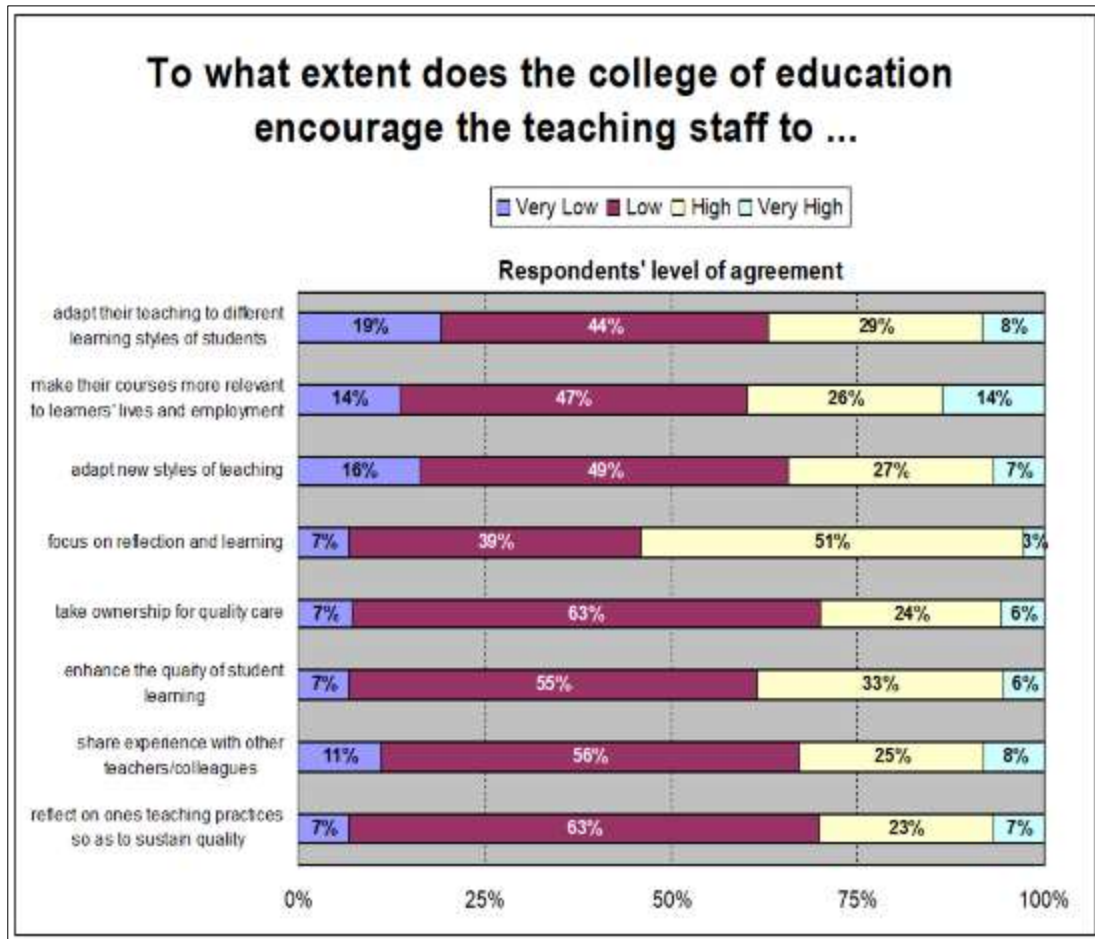


Figure 3 Extent of Encouragement for Action Research

As Figure 3 shows, in most cases the respondents rated “low” the extent to which the College encourages them to undertake the activities indicated. Particularly, 63% indicated that the encouragement from the College was “low” to take ownership for quality care” and “reflect on their teaching practices so as to sustain quality”. Furthermore, 56%, 55%, and 49% indicated that the encouragement from the College was “low” respectively to share experience with other teachers/colleagues, to enhance the quality of student learning, and to adapt new ways of teaching.

It was only pertaining to the issue of *focusing on reflection and learning* that almost half (i.e. 51%) of the respondents rated as “high”. This might be for the fact that 39 (51%) of the respondents have got exposure to and are demanded to exercise action research/reflection and learning as a result of their attendance of Higher Diploma Program (HDP), which is a practice-based training program for teacher educators at HEIs in Ethiopia.

In the same vein, requested to rate how often the College initiates and supports staffs to review their respective course contents, 74% indicated that there was no regular review tradition or system at the College. A similar question was presented in the interviews with the three members of the central leadership of the University. From the discussions, it has been understood that there was no tradition to empower and support the staffs to regularly review their respective course contents. Their overall responses reflect that unless it is a change of objectives or curricula due to change of system or top-down paradigm shift, the staff members have very little says on the revision of programs and their contents as they wish. Especially, recent practices with regard to curricula and course content are said to be inflexible and are prescriptions by the Ministry of Education. This finding, therefore, aligns with those given by the staff respondents.

2.5. Rationales for not doing action research by the staffs

As mentioned before, the large majority teaching staff (92%) indicated that they practice action research “sometimes” or “not at all”. These respondents were asked to indicate the major hindering factors to do action research frequently.

Their responses have been synthesized under the issues related to empowerment, policy and guidelines, political environment, and the staffs themselves.

Large class size, unavailability of motivation/incentive mechanisms, time constraint/workload, low recognition and concern for staff initiatives and lives, low participatory decision making culture, and poor supply of research facilities were listed by the staff respondents to be empowerment and support related hindering factors to practice action research so as to improve quality and standard. Moreover, the respondents indicated that lack of specific and clear guidelines to integrate research with course delivery, more of top-down policies for practices, lack of clear guidelines and flexible procedures that encourage transparency and staff confidence, lack of considering and counting additional works due to action research as work load for pay, giving exclusive attention to student issues and forgetting that of the staffs were among the hindering factors related to policy and guidelines.

The interviewees from the University also attested that prescriptive top-down interferences; negligence to the lives and profession of the teachers and lack of open debates and discussions, which had resulted in staff indifference, reluctance, lack of commitment, unsecured, unstable and low confidence, were among the hindering factors related to political environment. They also added that low collegial thinking spirit, hunting part time work, engaging in routine works rather than investing their full time for the improvement of their practices, and low interest to learn and improve their research skills were among the hindering factors attributable to the staff members themselves.

This implies that there was a general lack of encouragement for teachers to bring change and improvement for their practices. It has also been learnt from the interviewees and the respondents that other than general role statements in the University Legislation, and in the Higher Education Proclamations (2019 and 2009), there was no specific policy to motivate practitioners to be engaged in researching their own practices at the College in particular and at the University level in general. Consequently, the tradition of institutional self-reflection and self-learning at the University has not been developed as it ought to be.

The interviewees from MOE further pointed out that there was no tradition of action research and self-evaluation by staff members other than what students fill about teachers' performances every semester.

3. Summary

Sustaining education quality demands empowerment and commitment of the front line implementers, the teaching staffs. Teachers should be considered as both innovators and implementers; the ones who pose the questions and the ones who investigate the solutions (Lomax, 1996). Equally, teachers are expected to value commitment, openness, a quest for truth and fidelity for the implementation of genuine policies and guidelines. The results of the analyses of the data collected from different sources, however, have shown that there were serious limitations to empower teachers and put them into commitment to internally sense and take ownership of the improvement of their practices through enhanced collegial actions. This is regardless of the fact that a large majority of all respondents (teaching staffs, students, staffs from the central leadership of the University and MOE officials) indicated that action research could make a difference in sustaining quality and standard of teaching-learning at the University.

The large majority teaching staff (92%) indicated that they practice action research "sometimes" or "not at all". This general pattern was confirmed when both students and teaching staffs were asked to rate how often instructors were engaged in a range of specified action research activities. The findings have also proved that the level of the encouragement and support that the staff members received for doing action research were rated "low" or "very low" by the majority of the staffs. When asked to indicate basic hindering factors to do action research frequently, the teaching staffs mentioned a wide range of issues. These include time constraint, heavy workload, low recognition and concern for staff initiatives, poor supply of research facilities, lack of specific and clear guidelines to integrate research with course delivery, lack of considering and counting additional works due to action research as work load for pay, lack of open debates, staff members' low collegial thinking spirit and engaging in routine works rather than investing their full time for the improvement of their practices.

4. Conclusions

Sustaining quality depends very much on the extent to which the teaching staffs are provided with an opportunity to claim ownership and control over their own professional practices as a result of which they experience a deficiency so as to bring change which turns into improvement. It can, however, be concluded from the findings that the environment and the practices at the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, AAU is far from this ideal situation. Teaching staffs

mentioned a long list of hindering factors to do action research. Some of these may be difficult to settle for the University management. Decreasing class size and teacher workloads would require considerable financial resources. The cost of a substantial improvement in the supply of facilities to engage in action research would be considerable as well. Other obstacles may be difficult to deal with because they relate to lack of commitment and interest among the staffs to engage in action research. Handling these problems would require a major shift in organizational culture. Such changes are difficult to direct and control and usually require a considerable amount of time to gain momentum. Furthermore, lack of commitment to the teaching profession, which is among other things expressed in low collegial thinking spirit, indifference and hunting part time work, is probably also related to the level of teacher salaries. Still, most of the hindering factors mentioned by the staffs appear to be more amendable to direct manipulation by the University management as they relate to (a lack of specific regulations and management activities, for example low recognition of staff initiatives and the fact that additional work due to action research is not counted as workload for pay. The general picture that emerges from the staff responses is that overall little conscious efforts have been made to create a favorable working environment by establishing a vision and channels of communication to quality, empowering operational areas in which teachers are the key actors.

The findings imply that the Addis Ababa University with MOE should encourage and empower the teaching staff members to sense improvement to quality from within rather than imposed initiatives. This demands of the University and MOE to enable teachers review regularly their respective curricula contents and implementation, claim ownership of the improvement of their practices, and feel secured in all aspects of sustaining quality and standard of their works so that the University can cope up with today's fast running, volatile environment, and global-information, and knowledge-based economy and maintain excellence. The University should claim that it is a place where free mind and conscience of the society exist and are exercised. The author strongly believes that it is within the powers of the University leadership and MOE to stimulate such activities and processes.

Moreover, MOE with the University leadership should set specific and communicable incentive systems for practitioners to be engaged in researching their own classroom practices to sustain the quality of their work. Particularly, efforts to sustain quality through action research should be rewarded with substantial salary increments. Equally, the teaching staffs themselves should be stimulated to critically reflect on their teaching for the betterment of their profession through continuous analysis of their roles, and responsibilities. They should be encouraged to take actions in furthering effective classroom practices and sharing the results with colleagues with the purpose of improving quality and standard of their work. This requires the creation of an attractive working environment by granting unwavering academic freedom and empowering staffs so that they may be interested to continuously investigate their practices for betterment and feel secured regardless of the results of their action research. The University should work further to enhance the present awareness about the importance of action research to sustain quality and standard of teaching-learning at the College in particular and at the University-wide in general.

Finally, as action research is a developmental process in which each ending is a new beginning, and as the answer to one question generates new questions, there are many fertile grounds for further related investigations. Particularly, whether those staff members who were practicing action research might deliver high quality education should be a topic of further research. However, the present study clearly shows that action research requires an environment, which stimulates and enables staffs to conduct these activities in the first place.

Compliance with ethical standards

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

References

- [1] Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE] (2019). Higher Education Proclamation, No.1152/2019, 25th Year, No. 78
- [2] FDRE (2009). Higher Education Proclamation No. 650/2009, 15th Year, No. 64.
- [3] Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (1988). *The Action Research Planner*, Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press. (available at <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-lewin.htm>)
- [4] Lomax, Pamela (ed.) (1996). *Quality Management in Education. Sustaining the Vision through Action Research*. London: Routledge/Hyde Publications

- [5] Ministry of Education [MOE] (2010). Education Sector Development Program IV ESDP IV (2010/2011-2014/2015) Program Action Plan /PAP [working paper]
- [6] MOE (2005). Educational Statistics Annual abstract. Ministry of Education: Ethio Tikur Abay Printers
- [7] Rainey, Isobel (2000). Educational Action Research, Volume 8, Number 1; Action Research and the English as a Foreign Language Practitioner: time to take stock; University of Surrey, Guildford, United Kingdom (available at taylorandfrancis.metapress.com/index/T574QW0T388168VK.pdf)
- [8] Scheerens, J. & Hendriks, M. (2002). School self-evaluation in the Netherlands. In David Nevo, (ed.) School based evaluation: an international perspective. Amsterdam, San Francisco: JAI Press (113 –144)
- [9] Scheerens, J., Glas, C., & Thomas, S.M. (2003). Educational Evaluation, Assessment, and Monitoring. Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger
- [10] Smith, Mark K. (2001). 'Kurt Lewin, groups, experiential learning and action research', the encyclopedia of informal education, (retrieved from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-lewin.htm>)
- [11] Van Manen, M. (1990). Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy. Ontario: University of Western Ontario, Althouse Press. (available at www.aare.edu.au/03pap/ker03352.pdf)
- [12] Verster, Cheron (nd) Teaching English. Action Research. British Council, 10 Spring Gardens, London SW1A BN, UK (http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/action_research.shtml#top)
- [13] Vroeijenstijn, A.I (1995). Improvement and Accountability: Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis: Guide for External Quality Assessment in Higher Education. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- [14] Watson, D. & Maddison, E. (2005). Managing Institutional Self Study. London: Open University Press
- [15] World Bank (2003). Higher Education Development for Ethiopia. Human Development sector, Working Paper series.