

Beyond Compliance In The Implementation Of Quality Assurance In The Ghanaian Higher Education: What Next

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Abstract

This paper examines how quality assurance (QA) is viewed, implemented and practiced in higher education sector in Ghana. It discusses and provides an up-to-date overview of the QA systems, procedures and mechanisms that are employed by the external quality assurance agency (EQAA) and the institutions to improve the quality of education provided and identifies challenges faced in implementing recommendations made by the 1991 educational reforms in relation to the quality of higher education and QA regime in Ghana. Desk data that involves analyzing information that already exists was employed. The paper also reviewed existing literature on initiatives and approaches made by higher education institutions to address A practices (systems, policy and strategy) at the international level. Finally, based on the conclusions and lessons drawn from these analyses, the paper proposes for government, policy makers, the National Accreditation Board and the institutions some actions that should be taken to strengthen the internal quality assurance (IQA) structures that will contribute to efficient and effective quality enhancement within higher institutions in Ghana .

Keywords: Damages, Gully Erosion, Human Activities, Physical Structures.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of quality in higher education in Ghana like other African countries remains a major concern .Since the 1980s, quality in higher education has been given increasing prominence by governments throughout the world. Quality assurance (QA) has become the focus of attention and a central element of higher education. Concerns have been raised about whether stakeholders are getting real value for their investments. This has resulted in the development of various forms of internal and external monitoring of the education provided by higher institutions. The question most scholars ask is why has QA in higher education become a topical issue in both advanced and less advanced nations; and also for all categories of higher institutions? Although circumstances vary among nations, several broad factors have accounted for the paradigm shift,among them according to Varghese (1)is the rapid ‘massification’ of higher education over the past two decades that has exponentially increased the demand for access worldwide. He posited that higher education has for the past decade experienced a significant expansion of the number and enrolment levels as prompted by the increase in demand of access to higher education. Machumu and Kisanga [2] maintained that because higher education has become a tradable commodity across borders, there is the need to institute international safeguards to ensure international standards in the education being offered across borders. Supporting this notion, Vincent- Lancrin,

and Pfothner, (3) noted that higher education has become a 21st century tradable commodity of international proportions under the GATS agreement with many emerging opportunities and challenges. In parallel, new delivery modes and cross-border providers have appeared, such as campuses abroad, electronic delivery of higher education and for-profit providers (OECD), (4).

Furthermore, student mobility has increased immensely, thereby requiring the need of introducing instruments for comparability of the quality of education provided. On their part, Pozo, Bretones, Martos,Alonso, and García,(5). Maintained that QA informs and encourages continuous improvement and control in the management of quality of education offered in higher education institutions. In addition, we are in the era where competition among higher education institutions for students and funds is highly significant. With globalization, the educational environment is characterized by increased competition. In order to survive in such environment, we need to be worried about the quality of our programmes. The Inter University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) concluded that no university will survive the present competition with other universities in the country, in the region and the world without paying attention to QA. Of particular significance is the rapid growth of the private sector in higher education; in Ghana it amounts to almost

30% of the students registered in higher education institutions.

These factors have led to several approaches by governments and institutions to improve the quality and QA of higher education in Africa. These include the establishment of external quality assurance agencies (EQAAs) and QA initiatives at the national, regional and continental level. Organisations such as the African Union Commission, Association of African Universities and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa have taken active part in designing and implementing some major quality assurance initiatives in the continent. The Association of African University for instance has implemented two major quality initiatives – the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) and the Europe-Africa Quality Connect. The first initiative was to promote collaboration among national quality assurance agencies for the purpose of capacity building. In addition, the Network was established to support members of the African Association of Universities in creating or evaluating internal quality assurance (IQA) systems, and to share good practices amongst existing and emerging national regulatory agencies in Africa by developing guidelines for good practice in quality assurance (CHE & AfriQAN), (6).

Similarly, several QA activities have taken place at the regional level within Africa. The Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) is one such regional organization that is actively involved in QA in the East Africa region. This body is responsible for ensuring internationally comparable standards in the five partner countries of the East African block. In view of its mandate, the Council developed a regional QA system and held periodic capacity building training workshops on QA both at national and regional levels. Similar attempts have been made by the Anglophone West African countries to form a regional body and to also develop a regional QA framework for the sub region. The DAAD has organised capacity training workshops for a number of university administrators and QA officers from selected institutions for this purpose.

At the national level, the Ghana government like other African governments employed some measures to assure the quality of Ghanaian higher educational institutions. It is worth mentioning that the higher institutions both public and private have also initiated their internal processes and provisions to ensure that the quality of education provided is comparable to institutions globally.

This paper provided an up-to-date overview of the different policies, approaches and practices of QA in higher education sector in Ghana. It reviewed the progress made by the government of Ghana and

higher institutions in Ghana in implementing some of the recommendations of the 1991 educational reforms in relation to the quality of education provided and QA regime in Ghana. The paper offered some key insights, challenges and findings on how QA is currently being practiced from the perspectives of the National Accreditation Board (NAB), policy makers, and managers of higher institutions. Based on the discussion, the paper argues that the approach and procedures employed by the national external regulatory agency to address QA systems in the Ghanaian higher education sector has rendered the entire QA system in Ghana a compliance to NAB requirements with inefficient attention to quality enhancement within institutions.

The approach has accounted for the ineffective internal quality assurance (IQA) structures, policies and systems that has rendered the credibility of education provided by most of the higher institutions questionable. In light of the findings, this paper proposes two sets of recommendations for (1) government, policy makers and (2) higher institutions for a paradigm shift from the compliance approach to the establishment of an effective IQA structures that will contribute to efficient and effective quality enhancement within higher institutions in Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims specifically at reviewing the structures, processes and practices of quality assurance in higher education in Ghana. To present a vivid account of what is typically going on in the sector, a search for accurate data pertinent to the topic both published and unpublished was systematically conducted. The main sources of information for this paper were: documents and literature relating to the country's QA systems and the international literature on QA in higher education.

In relation to the first of these, the aim was to identify material that would give an accurate description of the major systems, the rationale for these, evidence of impact (positive and negative), and future developments. Both primary and secondary documents such as policies, descriptions of procedures, reports on the application of procedures, websites, internal archives, from the NAB and some institutions were used as sources. In addition to that, QA policies, conference proceedings, analytical reports, newspaper, magazine and journal content were analyzed to get appropriate data. Academic and other literature relating specifically to these policies and practices were also incorporated. International literature on QA in higher education was also explore to identify themes that provide critical insight both generally on the quality movement in higher education and more specifically on particular practices that are of relevance to this paper.

Significance of the Study

This study's findings could be a groundbreaking approach that will change the focus and the way the managers of quality assurance in Ghanaian higher education sector operates. Implementing the results of the study will result in a paradigm shift from the compliance approach, strengthen institutions IQA structures and ensuring institutions own the QA processes. The importance of continuous improvement in the activities of higher institutions justifies the need for more effective QA approaches. Thus, institutions that apply the recommended approach derived from the results of this study will produce quality students. Administrators will be guided on their approach.

The researches and information on establishing effective IQA processes in the Ghanaian higher education is not widely available to all stakeholders in Ghana and is limited. The investigation will uncover critical areas in the QA process that many researchers in Ghana could not explore. Thus, a new approach and best practices in strengthening and improving institutions internal quality assurance structures. The study will also give emphasis on best approaches that could be employed and the role of stakeholders. Information collected will help in establishing effective IQA systems in Ghanaian higher institution.

A major limitation of the study was the level of access to the existing literature. Documented information on institutional internal quality assurance structures in Ghana is scarce. Thus, access to literature on the subject was a limitation. The investigator was not able to conduct face to face interview with major stakeholders.

Higher Education Landscape and Major Developments after the 1991 Higher Education Reforms in Ghana

The origin of higher education in Ghana could be traced to the establishment of Achimota College in the mid-1920s which was to offer education from nursery through to first-year university courses in engineering. The college also provided courses preparing students for the University of London intermediate examinations. Because of these university courses, the College could be described as the first higher education institution in the Gold Coast. However, Effah (7) argued that the beginning of formal higher education is traceable to the recommendations of two high-powered commissions – the Asquith and Eliot Commissions – appointed by the government of the United Kingdom in 1943 with the mandate of making proposals for the establishment of a university in the West Africa sub-region. Consequently, the University College of the Gold Coast (now University of Ghana) was established in 1948 marking the beginning of

university education in Ghana. The College was affiliated to the University of London but following the passage of an Act of Parliament in 1961 (Act 79), the University College attained sovereign university status with powers to award its own degrees and certificates. Years later a second university was established to train engineers. At independence, Ghana had two universities.

These institutions competed favorably with their counterparts in other parts of the world until the 1980s, when for various reasons the quality of education provided declined. Stakeholders agreed that several factors have contributed to the decline in quality of higher education in Africa. According to Shabani, Okebukola, and Oyewole (8), these factors include:

- A decline in per-unit costs
- A rapid increase in student enrolments
- The poor quality of students admitted to universities
- Poor standards of academic and research infrastructure, including libraries and laboratories
 - Inadequate pedagogic training of academic staff
 - Poor governance
- Limited capacity of quality assurance mechanisms
 - The absence of quality assurance agencies to create and enforce mechanisms for ensuring quality.
 - Frequent university closures mainly due to strikes (p. 141)

Thus the tertiary educational sector in Ghana just like other African countries faced a lot of challenges during this period. Meanwhile the literature available shows that quality higher education can only work effectively provided some basic factors are present and are functioning effectively. Unfortunately, most of these conditions (as indicated by Shabaniet el above) were not present in Ghana during the 1970s and the 1980s.

For instance, higher education institutions in Ghana experienced chronic financial difficulties for many years due to reduction both in state subsidies and in financial support from the international community. Budget allocations by government to the universities, which accounts for about 90 per cent of their funds, have been reduced. Explaining this situation further, Akyeampong, Djangmah, Oduro, Seidu, and Hunt, (9) indicated that in 1982, per capita income was 30 percent below the 1970 level, and the index of real monthly earnings had fallen from 315 to 62. The reduction in funds has made it difficult for the institutions to provide the basic equipment, books and scientific journals necessary for teaching and research. It also accounted for the institutions inability to meet their required human and material resources. Indeed, the country suffered from a shortage of teachers as most lecturers left for greener pastures. In addition, classrooms were crowded, and

some lecturers did not qualify to teach the subjects that they were expected to teach.

By the late 1980s major stakeholders in the sector acknowledge that the level of quality of education had fallen and therefore agreed that urgent steps needed to be taken to reverse the trend and also to revitalize the sector. These situation prompted the government of Ghana to embark on series of reforms in the late 1980s. This situation was not peculiar to Ghana as Materu, (10) reported that during the last decade, many Africa countries recognized the importance of reforming their higher education systems. The most significant reform he identified as been in reaction or response to increased social demand for higher education and the decline in quality.

Following the implementation of the higher educational reforms, the sector witnessed major significant changes in its structure, governance and its relationship with the government. The sector has undergone a massive expansion with private sector

participation. There has been a shift from an essentially elitist higher education system to one which espouses inclusivity and the provision of study opportunities to all those who wish to take advantage of them. In such an expanded educational system in which both government and private providers participate, quality is of paramount importance to the Government and the public. The Government of Ghana thus consider quality as the foundation of the development of the higher education sector and recognizes that it is an area of major public concern.

Structure of Higher Education in Ghana

Higher education in Ghana comprised the universities, polytechnics, teacher training colleges, nurses training colleges, theological colleges, professional/specialist institutions and tutorial colleges.

The table below provides a breakdown of the type and number of tertiary education institutions in Ghana as of June 2017.

Table 1: Higher Education Institutions in Ghana as of June, 2017

Type of institutions	Universities	Polytechnics	Colleges of Education	Nurses Training Colleges	Others
Public	10	10	39	19	
Private	74	3	6	9	35

(Source: NAB Database, 2017), (11)

Development of QA in the Higher Education Sector in Ghana

The 1991 Government White Paper on the Reforms to the higher education system made a number of recommendations for the reforming and restructuring of the higher education sector in Ghana. Key among them as stated in NAB 2017 is the establishment of the External quality assurance regulatory agency to be responsible for the quality of the sector and capacity building in the field of QA in higher education in line with international practices. This is a move to establish a coherent and consistent approach to quality assurance in higher education. Most studies on QA in higher education highlights two main components of the systems including internal and external quality assurance systems. A review of international practices revealed that most developed and developing countries have followed this trend in the management of quality in higher education.

With regards to the internal quality assurance (IQA), Dill (12) refer to it as those policies and practices whereby academic institutions themselves monitor and improve the quality of their education provision. In the same vain UNESCO,(13) described it as each institution’s or programme’s policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own

purposes, as well as the standards that apply to higher education in general, or to the profession or discipline in particular. This implies that higher institutions are responsible for formulating and implementing internal structures and policies to enhance the quality of activities conducted within institutions. On their part, Martin and Stella (14) maintained that “IQA is part of the overall steering and management of the higher education institution (HEIs), on the institutional and programme level, to ensure one’s own purposes and goals are met. It defines the intentions and procedures although some might be externally prescribed” (p.34).

The second system on the other hand according to Niedermeier (15) is localized outside of the HEI. It can therefore according to Sanyal&Martin (16) be “anything related to QA that is driven from outside the institution and which evaluates or assesses the institution according to standards that are either agreed upon or pre-set”(p. 5). It is to ensure accountability from the institutions for the funds spent on them. In addition, Machumu &Kisanga (2) expressed the view that there is demand for external quality assurance (EQA) because the provision of higher education is becoming even more diversified and globalization also creates the need for more standardization so that qualification can be more easily assessed.

The National Accreditation Board and its Functions

Based on the recommendations of the 1991 educational reforms, the government of Ghana launched some initiatives to improve the quality and QA of higher education sector in Ghana. These include the establishment of an external regulatory agency. Thus, the establishment of a national accreditation system in Ghana arose from a mandate of PNDCL 317, 1993 which culminated in the establishment of National Accreditation Board (NAB) in 1993. This Law established NAB as the national external quality assurance agency with the mandate of accrediting HEIs and their programmes and also in charge of quality management of the tertiary sector in Ghana. However, this legislation has since been amended into an Act of Parliament, the NAB Act 2007, (Act 744) and operationalised by Tertiary Institutions (Establishment and Accreditation) Regulation, 2010 (L.I. 1984). The purpose was for the government and parliament to ensure that a quality management system for the higher education sector was established through a basic legal framework. The NAB Law outlines the functions of the NAB in relation to the operations of HEIs. There is also a Legislative Instrument which explicitly establishes the relationship between the board and the institutions.

The legislation on QA which was passed in 1993 seemed to enforce governmental control upon the

increasing growth of higher education providers in the country. It was also the nation’s attempt to regulate the rapid expansion of private sector involvement in higher education. The 1993 law on accreditation imposed the external control on higher education providers’ staffing, appropriateness of the curriculum for each study domains, the infrastructure and the management and administrative practices.

The major QA function of the NAB is the certification of both public and private HEIs with regard to the contents and standards of their programmes. To facilitate this process, the NAB has developed instruments purposely for eliciting information from institutions for both institutional and programme accreditation. Regarding the scope of its operation, NAB administers the same instruments and standards to the entire higher education sector irrespective of its ownership and category. In addition, a roadmap for accreditation and Presidential Charter has been developed to guide the institution particularly the private providers in their quest for accreditation and Charter.

The NAB’s accreditation process involves four stages: authorization, institutional accreditation, affiliation, programme accreditation. However, the public institutions are exempted from the authorization and affiliation processes because they are established by Act of Parliament.

Table 2: Flowchart of Accreditation processes of NAB

QA Procedure		Purpose		Frequency		Decision-taking
Authorization	→	granted permission to mobilize resources for the establishment of the institution	→	one off	→	NAB
Institutional Accreditation (Mandatory)	→	To ensure that institution has the essential infrastructures (libraries, facilities, computing, financial, technology, etc.) to meets it mission	→	At the establishment of the institution, subsequently every 5 years,	→	NAB
Affiliation (Mandatory for newly established private institutions)	→	to seek approval from a chartered institution for mentoring purposes	→	Once, at the establishment of the institution	→	Mentor institution
Programme Accreditation (Mandatory)	→	Certification of programmes with regard to the contents and standards	→	At the beginning of the programme, subsequently 3 or 5 years	→	NAB

Flowchart of Accreditation processes. Source: NAB, (11).

Accreditation appeared to be the major QA role of the Board as the name implies and it is the system whereby NAB accords recognition to an educational provider for meeting its established minimum standards. Institutional accreditation as explained in the roadmap is granted to applicants to establish HEIs when they have assembled the requisite resources and deemed ready to run approved programmes. It ensures that institutions have the necessary infrastructures (classrooms, libraries facilities, computing, financial, technology, etc.) to meet its mission. Programme accreditation on the other hand specifies programmes that an accredited higher education provider has been permitted to offer within acceptable standards. This is granted to programme that had met the set minimum standards in terms of inputs like curriculum, staffing and other resources required to facilitate effective teaching and learning. After assessment, NAB issues a certificate to an institution indicating its accreditation status and the period for which the status is valid. It also specifies the programmes and levels at which they should be offered by the accredited institution.

Accreditation in Ghana is mandatory but the outcomes are not linked to funding, access to any substantial income, or resources to the institutions. The outcome is solely for the external agency's recognition status at the national and international levels, as well as the license to operate. It is worth mentioning that institutional or programme accreditation granted private institutions by it- self does not confer an institution a warrant to award its own certificates. The NAB law provides that all newly established private HEIs should be affiliated to a degree awarding institution with the requisite expertise for a minimum of 10 years for purposes of mentorship and the award of certificates. The law requires the university to mentor and award its qualifications to the students until the institution is granted a "Presidential Charter" for the award of its own qualification.

As part of the accreditation process, institutions are required to complete a set of questionnaires designed by the Board to elicit requisite information. These are assessed and followed up with relevant visitations before grant of accreditation. NAB relies on external experts for the evaluation process for accreditation. These assesses have the primary responsibility for ensuring the consistency of evaluations and enhancement of the entire accreditation process. The panel of assessors submits its reports and recommendations within specified period. The panel is accompanied by NAB staff who predominately co-ordinate the accreditation process, site visits and report production. Their involvement is to ensure consistency and objectivity of the reporting process, however, they are not considered as members of the panel. These paper identified structural problems that

require more resources to support the growing demands being placed on the agency. NAB is handicap in many respects in terms of the support and guidance it is expected to offer to the institutions under its jurisdiction as far as quality matters are concerned. With regards to staffing, the Board has insufficient qualified staff to help the institutions that would require long-term and close guidance and monitoring to sustain quality programmes. Considering the landscape of the higher education sector in Ghana, NAB as the only external regulatory agency is overwhelm with the number of institutions under its scope.

The observation of Materu (10) that there are "insufficient numbers of adequately trained and credible professional staff at the agencies (in Africa) to manage quality processes with integrity and consistency across institutions/programmes and over time" (p. xviii) still persist in Ghana.

Administering a set of questionnaire for all institutions has accounted for NAB's compliance approach in its operations, as the Board has established criteria and minimum standards which serve as guidelines for institutions to merit accreditation status. The institutions only respond to these questionnaire in preparing for both institutional and programme accreditation and thus align their IQA processes to satisfy NAB's requirements and standards. All an institution requires for accreditation is to meet these requirements.

The importance of the external assessors' role in the accreditation process and promoting trust of the entire process cannot be overemphasized. Best practices requires that there should be a set of established and publicly available policies and procedures relating to the role of the external experts. The external agency is also required to maintain a register for external experts who are provided with adequate training. Training of assessors is a useful practice for providing a fair background for evaluating different institutions and the assessors become educated on what the agency's expectations are with regard to expert behaviour, conflict of interest, procedures and report writing. Unfortunately, NAB does not have any of these systems in place. The Board does not provide training for its external experts – an approach that is contrary to the accepted good practice at the international level. There is the need to build the capacity of the external experts to ensure consistency and effectiveness in the accreditation procedures.

The outcome of programme accreditation is the grant of approval or otherwise for a programme to be offered by the institution. The period for accreditation granted for a programme ranges from three to five years depending on the deficiencies identified in the

assessment report. Programmes assessed are grouped into two categories. The first category involves programmes that are denied accreditation on the grounds of not meeting the set standards. The Board may withhold approval for a programme to be offered if it is not convinced it can be taught to an adequate standard. The second category relates to programmes that are granted accreditation for the first time. These are granted three years' interim accreditation. Such institutions are provided the opportunity to rectify the deficiencies that were identified within the approved time frame. This will also enable NAB to undertake a re-accreditation before the first cohort of students complete the programme to ascertain the extent to which the deficiencies have been acted on. If after the re-assessment the deficiencies still persist, the programme accreditation will be revoked. However, if NAB is satisfied with the progress of the institution, then the programme is granted a full accreditation for five years.

This paper is of the view that the current practice employed by the NAB which heavily relies on the four steps identified above i.e. authorization, institutional accreditation, affiliation and programme accreditation, based on established minimum standards, is very time consuming, expensive and overburdens the institutions particularly the private institutions. For example, the programme accreditation/reaccreditation and affiliation processes are all based on similar criteria (if not the same) and the validity period ranges between three-five years. This implies that for a proprietor to start an institution or a programme, a permit has to be obtained from NAB and the affiliate institution at a very high cost. In addition, the instruments do not engage some major stakeholders like the employers and the professional bodies.

The affiliation process is not only time consuming but expensive and add to the operational cost of the private institutions. The process is not standardized, coherent and well-coordinated by the NAB. Subsequently, institutions have been left to do things on their own. The mentor institutions operate their own structures/processes in terms of fees, instruments, procedures, assessments and other service charges. Authorities from the private university colleges have criticized this process and complained that it drains the coffers of the institution because the mentor institutions tend to charge high fees. For instance, some mentor institutions charge a one off institutional affiliation fee in USA dollars and yearly programme affiliation fee (per programme). Beside, all other services rendered to the institution attracts charges. This is of huge financial burden to the mentoring institutions who have raised concerns about the entire process. The mentee institutions which are mostly private institutions with financial challenges further divert moneys that could be used

to fund quality related issues in paying for the affiliation process. In addition, the affiliation relationship stifles any innovation from the private institutions since the mentor institutions will always want to impose their ideas on them. Given that both the mentor and the mentee institutions are in competition, the former would not encourage any innovations that will enable the later to have an edge over it.

Another major challenge of this relationship is the fact that most of the mentor institutions are overwhelmed by the number of institutions that they mentor, rendering them incapable of providing effective mentorship. For instance, it was observed that almost all the private university colleges (about 74) in Ghana offer programmes in business administration and they will all want to be mentored by the few public universities that have business faculties. Though some of the mentor institutions have established affiliation offices with oversight responsibilities over these institutions, such offices are poorly staffed.

External quality monitoring has been a major focus of research and development in higher education. External quality audit is one of the approaches that has been employed by most EQAAs to monitor the operations and processes of HEIs. Hall [17] noted that quality audit involves a systematic review of the quality assurance and quality control mechanisms of an institution to ensure that they are sufficiently comprehensive and are achieving their purposes. NAB undertakes academic audits as post-accreditation exercises, to ensure the continued conformance with the terms and conditions under which accreditation was granted. The academic audit focuses mainly on the following areas: check on the admission process, the quality of grades that those admitted come in with, the processes of conducting examinations, staff recruitment, issues of financial resources required to be able to run the institution effectively. Although the monitoring process seems to be useful, its conduct is not very effective and regular. In most cases the audit is done randomly especially where shortcomings are detected or the Board receives a report that procedures have not been followed rigidly. Generally, academic audits are preceded by a self-assessment portfolio by institutions, but this is overlooked by the NAB's process. Public disclosure of audit reports is recognized as an example of good practice since this may present honest reports to the public and other stakeholders about the operations of the institutions to enable them make informed decisions. NAB does not publish its audit reports.

The reliability of the current external practices adopted by the NAB is questionable, as it is established that some institutions operate without

accreditation and/or other accredited ones still operational regardless of whether they continue to meet the established standards. There is public concern that even though most of the providers have undergone the accreditation process successfully, the facts still remains that majority of them do not fulfil the requirements. For example, requirements such as student's staff ratio, number and qualifications of faculty, leadership and governance structure, Library facilities/stock, the number of academic faculties and departments of an institution to qualify for university college status are rarely met. There are institutions without working strategic plans. Further, there is no even playing field for all the actors in the sector. NAB focuses its operations and activities mostly on the accreditation of private institutions simply because the fact is that quality and QA in higher education has been equated with formal accreditation by NAB.

Professional course approval and accreditation is one of the processes adopted by professional bodies to ensure the quality of professional programmes offered by HEIs. In some jurisdictions, students have to be licensed by the professional bodies before they can practice the profession. Specialized accrediting agencies target specific programs such as business, engineering, nursing, medicine, education, health professions and others to ensure rigorous standards of academic quality. Most of these professional bodies have developed their own requirements for the registration and qualification of their members. The bodies also have specific requirements relating to the course content and quality. Programme approval related to the needs of a professional body involves the direct participation of the body in the assessment process. Majority of the professional bodies in Ghana are however, not directly responsible for the accreditation of professional programmes run in the HEIs in Ghana. There is also no adequate external stakeholder involvement in curriculum development and approval processes. It should however, be noted that a representative from a professional body could join the NAB accreditation or (audit) panels. Similarly, there are no appropriate mechanisms in place to obtain useful feedback from graduates, industrialists and employers for programme development and approval.

Quality Assurance Practices at the Institutional level in Ghana

Establishing effective internal quality assurance (IQA) structures is an efficient way by which an institution manages the quality of education it provides. Utuka [18] noted that an institutional quality management plan should be the core quality-planning tool for the institution. These structures he stated should be guided by an institutional quality assurance policy that would reflect the institution's mission and values. Hannan, and Silver [19] also

contends that good management practice requires that all institutions should put in place adequate internal quality management and improvement plans. The recognition of the importance of QA in Ghanaian higher education is understood at the institutional level. In line with this, higher institutions in Ghana have employed different internal mechanisms and processes aimed at ensuring the quality of education they provide, however, these are often in a fragmented and ineffective manner. There are institutions where progress has been slower than might have been expected and where institutional managers are still in need of advice and support.

As part of its mandate, the NAB has instructed all HEIs to establish IQA units to be responsible for the IQA processes. This is because research has shown that the establishment of a unit responsible for the institutional wide quality management is considered an effective system for the improvement and assuring quality. This directive aims at ensuring that once accreditation has been granted, QA basically becomes the responsibility of the institutions to complement NAB's operations. Despite this directive, information available revealed that majority of the institutions do not have internal QA units and structures manned by various senior staff tasked with the responsibility of managing and coordinating institution-wide QA activities. There are no qualified, well defined and designated officers responsible for the institution-wide quality management in these institutions. Consequently, some of these units are headed by Faculty who perform the quality task as additional responsibility. It is also established that most institutions do not have documented IQA policies and procedures that are required to provide a framework for the stakeholders about the QA system within the institutions. Further, most Institutions do not have documented policy guidelines and clear definitions of roles and responsibilities that will be widely understood by staff involved in the QA process to ensure consistent practice.

These weak internal structures have resulted in the inability of institutions to undertake any effective self-assessment and periodic audit of their operations, the processes which are seen as helping the institutions to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and devise appropriate means for continuous enhancement. Consequently, members of the institutions do not feel ownership over their IQA systems. Since there are direct links between accreditation undertaken by the NAB and their legal and continuous survival, institutions seem to understand IQA as preparation for external inspection rather than internal reflection on teaching and learning. Literature suggest that the purpose of higher institutions' engagement in IQA processes should focus mainly on enhancing its systems. With this notion, institutions are required to produce

periodic self-evaluation reports to serve as background material for informative decision-making thereby considering the external recognition conferred by the NAB as a secondary benefit. This paper observed that institutions do not generate or start self-assessment procedures on their own initiative. The only questionnaire that are completed during the accreditation process are in compliance with NAB's requirements. This was the kind of approach which Barrow (20) cautioned against that, "the ownership of the system, let alone its intended outcomes, is unlikely to be achieved when the development of the system is carried out at a distance from the academics to whom, and by whom, the system is applied" (p. 33). Thus, connecting self-reviews to external needs is likely to waste both resources and energy.

With this current approach, there is the risk that the entire QA system in Ghanaian higher institutions results mainly in compliance to NAB requirements with inefficient attention to quality enhancement within institutions. The sector thus risks failing to gain institutional commitment to achieving desired quality outcomes simply because they are not likely to own the processes that are adopted and take responsibility for the quality of education provided as required. The literature has caution about this development or approach that compliance may pass for improvement only in the short term that the team from external agency is on the visit, but old habits are likely to re-emerge soon afterwards.

The external examining system is seen as a key tool in assuring assessment standards in higher institution globally. This system has operated in the Ghanaian higher education sector since the establishment of the first University College and still seems to enjoy considerable level of trust among the institutions. There is extensive literature in relation to the benefits of such systems. Stensaker, Brandt, and Solum(21) argued that external examiner systems ensure that degrees awarded by different institutions are generally comparable with respect to academic standards and treat students fairly ensuring a certain distance between teachers and those who assess their achievements. However, some scholars have expressed skepticism about this system's effectiveness in contributing to quality development of the assessment process in the Ghanaian higher institutions. There is the concern that most of the external examiners are not able to do any thorough work as required due to the growth in student numbers. Others also noted that there is inconsistency in examining processes and practice across institutions and subjects.

Higher institutions in Ghana are autonomous and self-regulating institutions that are required to develop and manage the conditions that will facilitate

the provision of appropriate quality and standards. Against this backdrop, the institutions adhere to their internal mechanisms such as programme approval, moderation processes/ criteria, course and staff appraisal as part of their internal quality assurance mechanisms. All the institutions appeared to have placed emphasis on the appraisal system as a means of assuring the quality of teaching. As observed by this paper and reinforced by the literature, questionnaire for student feedback are the major instruments administered by institutions to solicit evaluation data from the students. These surveys are undertaken to ascertain students' needs and to identify areas for attention that affect them and for improvement. Although institutions are increasingly using the students questionnaire for their feedback that has not triggered action for the remedy of most of the students problem. Some institutions undertake this exercise as a mere formality as it is observed that student still complained about its impart.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the challenges identified in establishing effective IQA in higher education in Ghana, the paper proposes two sets of recommendations: (i) for government and the NAB, and (ii) for higher education institutions:

- There should be established multiple External Quality Assurance Agencies for the sector to undertake the external component of QA of higher institutions. NAB as the agency set up by the government should be responsible for quality management for all higher institutions with the exception of the university sector, while the Vice Chancellor, Ghana a body set up by the public universities should be responsible for the quality of the public universities. Though the universities are autonomous institutions they should work closely to maintain standards that are established nationally and are internationally respected. This will resolve the structural problem of having only one methodology and criteria for all the different kinds of institutions. In addition, it will resolve the problem of staff inadequacy identified as a major problem.
- The NAB should allow for institutional autonomy by co-developing QA frameworks with the HEIs. These frameworks should document and clearly define the minimum requirements that institutions must satisfy or meet. The institutions should then draw upon these requirements to develop their IQA structures for their programmes according to their missions and goals. With this relationship, NAB will periodically audit these systems for their effectiveness.

- It is important that QA does not become too costly, bureaucratic and burdensome for the institutions. NAB' should therefore review its accreditation approach to make it flexible and less expensive for institutions. A suggested approach for programme accreditation is for an institution to submit its proposed programme to the NAB, post it on NAB's website for NAB to disseminate it to institutions offering similar programme and request inputs from experts in the field for the improvement of the programme. Comments and arguments should be made via NAB website till acceptable programme is developed. In this regard inputs will be provided by many experts without charges rather than sending about two or three experts to assess a programme at the expense of the institution
- NAB should conduct university ranking for higher institutions in Ghana to provide stakeholders with relevant information to enable them make informed decision about institutions in the country. This could also assist the university managers to identify areas that need corrective measures. The process should involve a periodic evaluation of accredited institutions to determine the extent to which they are complying with and maintaining the established minimum standards.
- Closely related to the above is the fact that since all institutions are operating in the same competitive environment, the affiliation process should be abolished to allow an even playing field for all accredited institutions. NAB should rather ensure that any institution granted accreditation to operate must meet the standards and capable of maintaining same. The results of the periodic evaluation should be used to enforce NAB's minimum standards. When properly organized, accreditation for any institution performing below standards should be revoked to promote fairness among institutions.
- NAB should publish distinct standards and performance indicators for assuring quality in all accrediting higher education institutions. The agency should be more concern with institutional self-improvement, where institutions can demonstrate some level of clear and effective IQA processes than matters of external control.
- Higher institutions should establish IQA units and structures manned by various senior staff who should be tasked with the responsibility of managing and coordinating both the internal and external quality assurance activities. They should provide capacity building training workshops for staff of the institutions. Quality assurance should be part of the institutional philosophy underpinning all activities of teaching, learning, research and the structure for quality assurance should recognize that the responsibility for quality lies at all levels of the University
- Institutions should adopt cyclical QA processes which should be aimed at continuous improvement. The adoption of the quality cycle (plan-act-evaluate-improve) within institutional strategic planning and QA frameworks will help identify areas that requires improvement and points of difference between the expected and actual processes as early as possible in the development process. This will enable defects to be identified and resolved as soon as possible.
- Institutions should strengthen their IQA structures, own the quality and the QA processes and be responsible for the quality of education they provide. It is important to ensure that extensive and rigorous IQA systems are in operation, if institutions are to prove that their policies and practices are successful, and comparable to institutions around the world. Internal QA may be far more respected by institutions than external QA because it will consists of continuous monitoring of operations and checks to determine conformance or non-conformance with internal and external standards. When properly organized, it will produce new or diverse ideas. And if it is regularly conducted and aligned with the institutional strategic plan, then external assessment can be less frequent. It is worth mentioning that for IQA to be effective, there must be strong leadership and staff commitment, willingness to expose weaknesses and ability to improve performance.
- Institutions should design their IQA structures to foster and promote a quality culture. This is very important because the principle whereby the quality cycle is integrated with the institution's strategic planning will play a vital role in promoting staff members' awareness of and commitment to the core values and practices of their institutions and continuous improvement that will contribute to the achievement of all operations. In such settings, QA will not be seen as an externally imposed requirement.
- Institutions should formulate policies regarding QA management. These policies should cover all aspects of their systems.

They should be documented as an institutional QA manual to provide a framework for the stakeholders about the QA system within the institutions. The manual should be subjected to periodic review as policies and procedures are modified or introduced.

- Institutions should undertake periodic self-evaluation to help them in identifying their strengths and weaknesses for improvement. Self-assessment should also constitute essential component of NAB academic audit. It should however be mention that the assessment should be owned by the institutions as a self-reflective mechanism.
- Higher institutions should be in constant touch with stakeholders in the sector during and after programme development and approval to ensure programmes are constantly updated to meet their needs.

CONCLUSION

This paper critically reviewed the QA practices in higher education sector in Ghana. Drawing from the analyses it is noted that the management of QA processes at the institutional level in Ghana has not witnessed significant development in the past three decades. Stakeholders are still grappling with many challenges relating to the management of quality of the sector. This can be attributed to the approached that have been employed by the NAB which focus on control and compliance to its requirements. As a result majority of institutions only consider IQA as a mere formality and usually in anticipation of accreditations demanded by the NAB for their continuous survival and operation. Recommendations have been made to establish a stronger bond between the internal and external quality assurance practices to strengthen the IQA structures that will contribute to efficient and effective quality enhancement within higher institutions in Ghana.

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