

Empirical Assessment of Quality Assurance Practices in Ghana Higher Education of Learning: A Focus on Private Universities

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Abstract

The quality of services provided by universities has been assessed by many studies as a crucial tool for evaluating students' performance which plays a key role in educational management (Stukalina, 2014). As the education sector moves to commercialization, it needs to apply the key current practices of businesses in order to be viable. This paper provides an empirical and critical review of quality assurance practices through the identification of promotional and constraining factors that inhibit quality assurance practices among private universities in the Bono Region of Ghana. Although this review cannot claim to be exhaustive, it does provide reasonable insights into the state-of-the-art and areas for improvement.

Keywords: *Quality Assurance, Accreditation, higher education, Ghana, Private Universities*

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Introduction

Many Ghanaian students were encouraged to pursue tertiary education to acquire knowledge and skill for government employment and occupy the expatriates' positions. Parents also desired to secure tertiary education for their wards to enable them compete effectively for the existing jobs (Cherry, 2004). As a result, student enrollment in the public and private universities increased by strong demand for higher education than by the demands of the labour market (Walker & Fongwa, 2017). However, the infrastructure development did not match the rate of enrolment, poor workshop and laboratory facilities served to produce ill-equipped graduates. Again, According to the 2016 National Council for Tertiary Educational Annual Budget Report, the large proportion of students enrolled in the Arts and Humanities relative to that in Science and Technology among Private Tertiary institutions was 35:60 against the national norm of 60:40 science/humanities ratio skewed favorably to programmes logistically easier to mount. In an effort to address this situation Private Tertiary Institutions needed to partner with industries and the wider community to produce strategically on demand (Moore, 2016). The cost of tertiary education increased rapidly and that posed a challenge to the poor. Conversely, jobs such as the oil and financial sectors seemed almost non-existent. At that time, adherence to the global business conventions caused high level of graduate unemployment by bringing higher skilled expatriates with setbacks into the country (Council, 2016). These challenges and others may have accounted for the paradigmatic shift which culminated in the establishment and the growth of private universities which brought about the need for regional and international regulation to protect stakeholders especially the first generational students who may not have social network to draw facts on legitimate higher education; ensure access to accurate information on the happenings of the institutions for decision-making purposes; and also monitoring their finances etc. by mandating private universities in Ghana to comply with policies, laws and practices of traditional universities to achieve the Global Standard for Quality Assurance in High Educational Institutions (HEIs) delivery involving training professionals for the public and private sectors of the economy to provide teachers and other professionals for the educational institutions and other sectors; with the legal mandate to award degrees (Bjarnason et al., 2009). According to the

report of NAB (2015), between December, 2011 and December, 2015, the number of public universities in Ghana grew from six (6) to nine (9); whilst the private universities grew from thirty-four (34) to sixty-six (66).

This study seeks to explore how private universities of Ghana understand the Quality Assurance concept, discover how the private universities take decisions concerning quality assurance, explore how the private universities practice quality assurance.

Literature Review

The literature sought to assess the theoretical background of the research, conceptual and empirical review.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework reviews theories which serve as the bases of the research. The discussion of quality assurance application processes in higher education in the literature, revealed uncertainties regarding the effectiveness of any one QA model emanating from several reasons including the variability of services and the quality frameworks of each QA organization to another (Asif, Raouf, & Searcy, 2013). There are many disparate ways to characterize quality in higher education. However, a common framework for a quality assurance model would provide consistent assessment of learning design, content, and pedagogy (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2008). The following studies portray diverse institutional views of QA on higher education:

Cheng (2010) sampled academics from seven institutions in England to examine how quality and audit affect academic work through capturing their views and experiences of quality audits. The study examined eight benchmarks for quality assurance mechanisms, with four being internally devised and implemented (peer observation, student course evaluation, annual program review, and the approval system for new and revised programs and units); and the other four mechanisms being externally developed: England's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) institutional audit, two external examining systems, and regulatory bodies (Cheng, 2010). Cheng examined the perceived effects of the eight mechanisms on the following phases of academic work: curriculum development, teaching practices, power relations between faculty and students, and faculty workload (Cheng, 2010). Cheng's study revealed that quality audits remain a source of controversy. Two thirds of the respondents felt the quality audit was vain and bureaucratic ; and regarded the university's relationship with QAA as distant from their own work and did not feel being part of the quality audit process as a result exhibited confrontation to the quality audit which produced "game-playing" attitudes to quality assurance mechanisms (Cheng, 2010).

Students also assess QA through the appraisal of academic programs to gain good experiences when allowed to participate in external evaluation panels and QA processes (Stukalina, 2014). Thus, as an instrument of QA, the student has the ability to see the situation from the learner's perspective, which others may not be able to consider. So the students' viewpoint should be placed at the center of quality in all areas of education, since they are essential component of quality assurance programs and processes (Carmichael, Palermo, Reeve, & Vallence, 2001; Alaniska et al., 2006). According to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), a major challenge of this tool is finding qualified students to participate in QA processes (2006) could be hindered by language and cultural issues (Alaniska et al., 2006); more so, students who do not participate in faculty or institutional boards may lack the implicit competencies to participate in QA evaluations. However, the benefits for involving students in QA processes sharpens students analytical abilities of the quality of the programmes and create a sense of ownership of the programs (Education, 2009;

Elassy, 2013). The quality of education students receive at the tertiary level is a reflection of the quality of graduates in the labour market as direct customers of the educational services (Belash et al., 2015).

In relation to students' productivity in the QA process, Malcom Baldrige administered the National Quality Award dedicated to excellence performance as a member of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). The recipients of the Award must demonstrate achievements and improvements that meet seven kinds of the criteria for excellence performance (Asif et al., 2013). The Baldrige educational programme refers to standards for performance excellence affiliated to the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and a powerful mechanism to assess performance excellence whereby the award recipients are required to demonstrate achievements and improvements that meet seven categories of the criteria for performance excellence. However, the criteria lack a theoretical foundation and it is too elusive and do not address the requirements from an academic standpoint and (Asif et al., 2013).

Quality Assurance Models

The three prominent approaches of quality assurance in Tertiary Institutions are perceived as the Control or Command Model, the Self-Regulation Model, and the Market Regulation Model (Jamieson, 2008). Quality assurance systems just like general reforms do not operate in isolation; rather respond to a range of factors, principles and directions that update the scope of higher education reforms in a given context (Mhlanga, 2008). According to Cloete et al. (2002), the role of a higher educational institutions today mirrors the collection of increased interest groups or stakeholders of universities affairs with competing interests. The classic triangle of coordination suggested three principal modes for coordinating behaviour in academic institutions: the state, academy, and the market as the primary forces of quality in Higher Education.

Command and Control Model

Jamieson (2008) observed that the Control Model is an effort by the state to control Higher Educational Institutions with set standards and to ensure that Institutions are sanctioned for failure to observe these rules and/or standards. An example of this model is how US state universities are regulated. In an educational system where the state provides much finance required of the universities, the state is responsible for negotiating public interests and expectations of higher educational institutions. Governments therefore, demand of universities efficiency, quality and accountability which strips them of their academic freedom and autonomy. The regulatory effect of the state varies from strict state control through interference, right up to supervisory role (Mhlanga, 2008). The Command and Control Model is an attempt by the state to control tertiary institutions (Jamieson, 2008).

Self-Regulation Model

In the Self-regulation Model, tertiary institutions are autonomous; they design their own curricula, award their own degrees and are ruled by professionals who are trusted with doing the right things. Traditionally, universities were unique organisations with protected role of knowledge generation and propagation, a cherished academic autonomy and their ivory tower status to teach students to advance human learning through production. Its realisation requires a necessary degree of autonomy, freedom and social responsibility which must be granted to the intellectual community involved (Pullias & Wilbur, 1984). These self-regulated universities are recognized as stakeholder universities that identify and establish strategic relations with partners such as foundations, funding agencies, professional bodies, government, the business sector and charities. (Mhlanga, 2008). That type of university is termed socially-embedded as opposed to a buffered university and are well-networked with employers, organizations and professional bodies in the turbulent and volatile economies as a

deliberate strategy to survive in an environment where government subsidy continually diminishes. The stakeholder-relations are mapped in order to find out which the crucial ones are and how much weight the university should attach to the various relationships (Jongbloed & Goedegebuure, 2001). It is worth noting that successful stakeholder universities are called upon to be accountable to an increasing number of external constituencies or stakeholders in making strategic choices and decisions (Jongbloed & Goedegebuure, 2001).

Market Regulation Model

In the Market Regulation Model there is a relationship between market competition and Tertiary Institutions. Market competition for tertiary institution causes students to make informed choices. According to Cloete et al. (2002) market-related values uphold non-academic corporate management styles, commodification of education, profit maximization and institutional efficiency which is believed to be brought about through tight competition between private and public providers of higher education. From a market point of view, issues of quality and standards of excellence are approached from the perspective of labour market demands by striving to do more with less. The best institutions flourish and the worst fails. Market ideologies encourage policies that promote economic efficiency through liberalization and deregulation of national markets. Yang (2003) argues, the market fails to safeguard the needs of those without money as it responds only with sensory equipment that can detect money and profits. According to Mhlanga (2008), the market ideologies promote commercial interests that protect profits and corporate styles of management that concentrate decision-making power in the hands of managers and not academics. A quality assurance system is then introduced in order to ensure the quality of the programmes. Even though the literature contains the discussion of the applications processes of quality assurance in higher education, uncertainty prevails on the effectiveness of any one QA models due to the varying nature of services and quality frameworks agencies from one QA organization to another (Asif et al., 2013).

Conceptual Review

The research works conducted at the various universities in Ghana facilitated the adaptation of responses to the call from industry to produce quality graduates for producing products and services needed by the ever modernizing competitive industry and economy.

Quality

In high education, quality is a challenging task, highly debatable concept, multidimensional and a matter of personal judgment yet, none of the definitions is universally accepted (Doherty, 2008; Tammara, 2005). It encapsulates the concept of meeting commonly agreed principles or standards. Such standards may be defined by law, an institution, a coordinating body or a professional society. According to Newton (2002), quality was imported from an industrial and commercial settings in the 1980s into the domain of High Education and also to other professional and public service settings. Dicker, Garcia, Kelly, and Mulrooney (2019) also assessed quality that staff value positive relationship with students; whilst students appreciate good methods of teaching and learning.

Similarly, Tam, (2001) interpreted quality in education as teaching and learning conforming to specifications and providing excellence. Further, Akareem & Hossain, (2016), identified the dimensions of quality higher education as: quality of students, faculty credentials, academic features, and administrative supports. The students' qualification and background contribute significantly to defining the quality of education. In addition, the teaching staff qualifications go a long way to place value on the institution and for that matter very important factors determining the perception of education quality as, the lecturers personal qualities of their profession such as general personal qualities, kindness, leadership and general attitude; professional knowledge to include knowledge of

the subject matter and didactic knowledge to be the most significant qualities needed to be an ideal teacher (Arnon & Reichel, 2007).

Another aspect of quality education is determined by three broad categories of academic factors within the universities: course contents, academic staff, and grades (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). The study showed that students' responses had a wide range of deviations among the three categories: academic content studied in the university; career skills that are needed either in or outside the college and life skills that are useful in all aspects of post-higher-education life. Lastly, the administrative systems of a university and the human resource management tools play important roles in developing the teachers, supporting changes in the organizational culture, preparing leaders and academic personnel for the implementation of quality higher education (Kohont & Nadoh Bergoc, 2010). All the above dimensions determine the quality of higher education.

This document adopts the following conception of quality and quality assurance from Materu, (2007) that defines quality technically as fitness for purpose. Quality in the context of higher education implying fitness for purpose seeks to conform to generally accepted standards as defined by institutions, quality assurance bodies and appropriate academic and professional communities. Fitness for purpose sums up the concept of meeting commonly agreed standards as defined by law, institutions, a coordinating body or a professional society and varies tremendously by field and programme. Quality education enable countries achieve sustainable development through improved training in the skills of their human capitals (Ashraf, Osman, & Ratan, 2016).

Quality Assurance Practices

Quality Assurance (QA) refers to multi-dimensional (quality of input, process and output) and stakeholder oriented procedure that translates stakeholders desires into institutional mission and goals and into the objectives of a faculty and the educational programme (Ashraf et al., 2016). In Ghana, Higher education quality assurance undertake internal assessment measures, verification of resources, as well as external peer review, policies guiding student admissions and staff promotions to facilitate the role of government as per the following definitions:

Karaim (2011) defined QA as the factors that drive institutions to achieve excellence in higher education. Other explanations describe QA in higher education as specific indicators reflecting the required inputs to yield desired output through acquisition of required licensing and accreditation prerequisites institution has to undergo planned and methodical review process of an institution or program to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are met, maintained and enhanced (Materu & Righetti, 2010). QA could be achieved at three levels: at a primary or institutional level by raising awareness towards achieving quality, to quality-oriented culture and creativity projects; nationally by way of creating a partnership between higher education institutions, government and agencies, with the intention of developing processes and necessities to assess conformity; and at the Global level, aiming at the universities being attested by other higher institutions of learning, in order to turn these universities into strong competitors to those in the world.

QA drives higher institutions to achieve excellence in education. Nevertheless, the major challenges in many private universities have been ensuring that the quality of educational programs meets local and international standards concurrently (Blackmur, 2007). Till now, quality has no mutual definition and this calls for the cooperation of QA agencies review decisions.

Quality Assurance Mechanisms

The Global Standard for Quality Assurance in Higher Education is divided into two and suggests requirements for both internal and external quality assurance:

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and External Quality Assurance (EQA)

Internal Quality Assurance refers to the procedures and mechanisms implemented in an institution or programme to ensure that it is fulfilling its own purpose and meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular (UNESCO & Statistics, 2007). The policies and practices of various universities designed to ensure the quality of education (Blackmur, 2007). Thus, internal quality assurance is improvement-oriented and aims at developing the quality of teaching practice, learning conditions, research or management within the framework of self-regulation of higher education institutions.

On the other hand, **External Quality Assurance (EQA)** refers to the national policy framework designed by the state for academic institutions operations to ensure academic standards (Blackmur, 2007). Vlasceanu, Grünberg, & Parlea (2004) also described EQA as a valuation method regarding the quality and effectiveness of the academic programmes of an institution, its' staffing, and structure that is undertaken by an external expert. In other words, the actions of external bodies or anybody other than the institution itself that assesses its operations or programmes, in order to determine whether it is meeting the agreed or predetermined standards (UNESCO & Statistics, 2007). This study is more oriented to accountability and assessed on the basis of the following standards: use of internal quality assurance procedures, development of external quality assurance processes, criteria for decisions, processes fit for purpose of reporting, follow-up procedures, periodic review sand system-wide analyses.

Many scholars have criticized EQA in differing ways. To Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2002) the main result of external quality assurance systems are regarded as bureaucratic procedures and they exert rigid controls over academic institutions. Whilst, Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) also argued that if EQA causes programmes design to be very rigid, then higher education institutions may not have the flexibility to respond innovatively to new demands.

Ghana National Accreditation Board

Accreditation seeks to review the quality of higher education institutions and programs. Following the establishment of private universities and their importance, the need for QA is paramount to development. The government of Ghana formally introduced quality assurance by establishing the National Accreditation Board (NAB), under the Ministry of Education (MoE) to be responsible for quality assurance in higher education within the territorial jurisdiction of Ghana. The government of Ghana established the National Accreditation Board (NAB) in 1993 under the policy guideline of the PNDC Law 317 as the nation's quality assurance body for public and private higher education institutions. The legislation has since been substituted by National Accreditation Board Act of 2007, (Act 744) and the Tertiary Institutions (Establishment and Accreditation) Regulations, 2010 (L.I. 1984). NAB instituted the mandatory establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU) to perform one or more depending on their assigned mandates include the following: Promote quality culture through the facilitation of workshops and seminars on quality related themes; review and advise management of the institution's 'Strong Room'; supervise the conduct of examination; facilitate capacity building of academic and support staff within the institution; ensure institutional accreditation process and other quality activities such as annual reporting; facilitate the development, dissemination and application of quality benchmarks for the various academic and administrative activities of institutions; facilitate the collation and integration of feedback from students and other stakeholders on quality related matters in the institution; prepare annual report on quality assurance

based on the quality benchmarks set out for the institution; oversee issues pertaining to the internal and external ranking for the institution and its programmes; managing the institution's affiliation with mentoring institution; and assisting in the development and assessment of curricula (Dattey et al., 2014; NAB, 2011).

Empirical Studies

Several contributions of some authors on the practices of Quality Assurance among private higher institutions of Ghana indicate that QA agencies in tertiary education seek to accomplish two main purposes: improvement and accountability. In a study conducted by Tsevi (2014), it was discovered that the major issue of concern of the National Accreditation Board (NAB) with private higher institutions remained balancing accountability and improvement through quality assurance to maintain confidence and integrity of the programmes (Dattey et al., 2014).

Considering the importance of manpower intensive skill, its provision has become an essential product of higher levels of education, technical competence and computer literacy (Tsevi, 2014; Badu-Nyarko, 2013). The literature also established the importance of tertiary institutions in fostering national development through teaching, research and national development by developing the intellectual capability of staff and students to understand and appreciate their local and external environment (Agba and Ocheni, 2017; Boateng, 2014).

Again, Utuka (2008) examined the emergence of private higher education and the issue of quality assurance in Ghana, the role of National Accreditation Board (NAB). It revealed that among others, a common feature found in the midst of private universities was reliance on part-time lecturers which results in negative impact of teaching alone at the neglect of research work (Varghese, 2004). In their study, Alhassan, Sowley, Yakubu, and Kassim (2018) surveyed the level of involvements and satisfaction of the alumni of the University of Development Studies regarding academic and curricular facilities provided by the University with the view to assist the Institution to review the services provided and to improve upon the quality of the educational programmes to meet the expectations of the stakeholders. It revealed that the graduants were generally satisfied with the academic programmes and other extra-curricular activities of the University. However, they were quite displeased with the inadequate health facilities and poor services.

Scope and Key Performance Indicators of Quality Assurance

Tertiary institutions are central to the quality developmental needs of developing countries and catalysts to entrepreneurial development such that the quality of knowledge generated in the institutions is critical by sharpening the minds of the individual to transform the society economically, socially and politically for sustainable development (Ojiambo, 2009). The scopes of quality assurance among universities are measured by different quality assurance dimensions such as exceptional, consistency, fitness of purpose, value for money and transformation (Ramirez, 2014; Stensaker, 2007).

According to the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the U.S. central government's major interest is to ensure that the role of accreditation in maintaining quality in higher education for students who benefit from federal financial aid programs is fulfilled within the accreditation processes (Workgroup, 2016). In a broad range of factors, quality in tertiary institutions include their vision and goals, talent and expertise of their teaching staff, admission requirements, assessment standards, the teaching and learning environment, the employability of its graduates, the quality of its library and laboratories, management effectiveness governance and leadership (Ramirez, 2014). The growth of private higher education is noticeable in countries of transition and quality assurance offers some global benchmarks:

Quality as Exceptional: This idea of quality seeks to imply passing a required standard or exceeding high standards of academic achievements. Harvey (2004) noted that quality in this approach is achieved if the standards are distinct. This traditional view of quality is linked with elitism; it does not offer criteria against which to measure quality nor attempt to define quality.

Quality as Value for Money: This notion of quality sees quality as return on investment through effectiveness and efficiency. If the same outcome can be achieved at a better result and at the same cost, then the customer has a quality product or service. Increasingly students require value-for-money for the cost of higher education.

Quality as Fitness for Purpose: Quality as fitness for purpose perceives quality as meeting the stated purpose, customer specifications and satisfaction. Thus, quality as meeting customer institutions stated objectives. The problem here is that different stakeholders in higher education may have different understanding of what quality is. Another problem with the fitness for purpose definition of quality is that it is difficult to identify the purpose of higher education.

This conception of quality needs to be complemented with the conception of the fitness of purpose for higher education so that an evaluation could be discussed and challenge the relevance of purpose to ensure improvements (Stensaker, 2007).

Quality as Transformation: This notion sees quality as a process of qualitative change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning (Harvey, 2004). According to this concept of quality, higher education is not a product or service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participants. Transformation in education denotes improvement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge. Empowering students means engaging them in selecting their own curriculum, monitoring the quality of their education as well as constructing their own learning contracts and also empowering them as critical, transformative learners (Stensaker, 2007).

Methodology

The methods and tools used to conduct the research comprised of the research strategy and design which served as the blueprint of the research. It is followed by the targeted population and how the sample was selected to participate in the research.

The Bono Region which formed the study area was created out of the former Brong Ahafo Region through the 2018 referendum for creating new regions under the governance of the President Nana Addo Danquah Akuffo Addo and one of the sixteen (16) regions of Ghana with a population of about One Million and Eighty Two Thousand, Five Hundred and Twenty (1,082,520) (Service, 2019). It is blessed with two (2) public universities: university of Energy and Natural Resources and Sunyani Technical University; as well as two (2) private universities: Catholic University College of Ghana, Fiapre and Methodist University College of Ghana with both being religious inclined and affiliated to different public universities (GSS, 2014).

Instrumentation

Semi-structured instrument was used to gather primary data for the study. The interview guide was developed and used to generate non-factual data on the respondents' understanding and perception of quality assurance practices in their institutions. The interview guide was made up of both open and closed ended items. These instruments were opportunity for the participants to provide detailed response through probes to encourage participants to elaborate and also clarify their responses where necessary (Kusi, 2012). The nature of the research also demanded real evidence of quality assurance

practices so secondary data were gathered to complement that of the primary data. In that case, documentary analysis was used as a method to generate secondary data.

Research Design

The study employed interpretation research paradigm with the view to comprehend the setting of social phenomena through interviews (Creswell, 2007; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). It requires the interpretation of social phenomena ‘via the eyes of the participants instead of the investigator’ (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). A phenomenological model was employed to provide the logical framework of the study deeply understand the experiences of academic and non-academic staff of selected private universities in the Bono Region of Ghana: Catholic University College of Ghana, Fiapre and Methodist University in assessing quality assurance practices (Sun, 2009; Creswell, 2013).

Validity and Reliability

In this research, three of the concepts namely credibility, dependability and confirmability were strictly adhered to ensure trustworthiness of the outcomes that emerged from the research in line with Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggestion of comparable concept of trustworthiness which entails four aspects: credibility (validity), dependability (reliability), transferability (generalisation) and confirmability (objectivity) for qualitative research.

Data Analysis

According to Bernard et al. (2016), there is no one correct way of analyzing qualitative data. Thematic data analysis was used to screen, coded and analysed the data. Thematic analysis is a process whereby trends or themes within the dataset were identified, analysed and reported (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each interview was transcribed and coded after the interview. The results were presented in themes. The interpretive analyses were used to analyse the data which will be generated from the contents of the documents.

Qualitative analysis of data largely depends on the analytic and integrative skills of the researcher as well as the personal knowledge of geographic and social context in which the data was collected. The emphasis in qualitative data analysis is on understanding the phenomena of interest or making sense in the social setting of study. The process for data analysis and presentation followed the five-step approach developed by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2014) for analyzing qualitative data, which are as follows: Get to know the data; Focus on the analysis; categorizing the information into themes or patterns; identifying patterns in the themes; and Interpreting and bringing all together.

Findings

This final section of the work provides the major findings on which conclusions were made.

The study was undertaken to unveil how private universities take decisions on quality assurance and the major quality assurance practices.

It emerged from the research that the private universities strictly adhere to quality assurance guidelines which have been provided by internal management structure as well as external provisions. Both administrative and academic staff of the institutes work according to quality assurance guidelines to result in quality delivery of education to the students who subscribe to their programmes.

The research also unveiled that numerous quality assurance measures and practices are put in place for the betterment of the stakeholders of the university education in the educational system. Quality

assurance practices undertaken by the universities include following rigorous procedures in admission of students into the institutions, following due process in hiring competent and qualified administrative and academic staff to play diverse roles in providing education for the students, ensuring staff development, promotion and progress, soliciting feedback from the students they train through conducting student satisfactory survey, ensuring that teaching and learning as well as student assessment are conducted in ways that elicit confidence from players in tertiary education. Other practices include undertaking periodic curriculum reviews, faculty peer reviews, faculty performance evaluation; usage of external assessment moderators, institutional self-audit, mid-year reviews and annual retreats to assess institutional performance.

Furthermore, the research discovered that the private universities conduct their businesses by conforming to the regulations and directives offered by the institutions which regulate all tertiary institutions in the country. To a very large extent, the institutions go by the requirements set out by the regulatory body namely NAB/NCTE. The close monitoring activities undertaken by the regulatory body go a long way to ensure that the institutions do not deviate from the guidelines. The institutions are also able to conform to the mentoring universities who have been mandated by the regulator to play mentoring roles. As much as possible, the institutions perform their functions in line, hook and sinker manner with the internal and external protocols.

However, in pursuing their activities in line with NAB and the mentoring universities' guideline, the institutions encounter some challenges which include experiencing conflicting directives from the regulator and the mentoring institutions, being directed to have human resource to the level of the public universities and not being required to do certain things without prior approval from the mentoring universities.

The findings also indicated that the universities' quality assurance practices consist of external and internal practices. External quality assurance began with the establishment of the university rationalization committee. This was replaced with the establishment of the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) and later augmented with the establishment of National Accreditation Board (NAB). The NCTE introduced the norms for tertiary education and requirements for teaching at the university level. NAB also introduced the requirements (institutional and programme) for accreditation and issued directives for establishment of quality assurance units in the tertiary sector and periodic quality audit of private universities and cyclical reviews. On the issue of promotional factors, the study identified the following influences: establishing quality assurance units, ensuring hiring qualified staff, proper documentation management.

The private universities' adherence to the internal and external quality assurance protocols and guidelines is a good move to achieving the strategic goals, missions and visions of the institutions. The establishment of quality assurance units and formation of faculty committees to monitor the progress of implementation of quality assurance policies and guidelines are paving the way for them to emerge as viable tertiary institution in the Bono Region and the country at large. The practices of providing fruitful means for both the administrators and academic in the universities.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations if implemented have the potential of improving the performance of teaching, research, community service and administration as well as enhance the efficiency of the university system:

A necessary pre-requisite to ensuring QA practices in tertiary institutions would be the provision of infrastructure for the well-being of the institutions and training of staff in the conduct of self-evaluation and peer-review through.

The private universities should consider the needs of the surrounded industries and produce to suit their requirements. Thus, the needs of the industry should be consulted when designing the programmes or curricular so that the products will be according to the expectations of the industry.

Considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global educational systems in general and Ghana in particular, it is recommended that there should be a national policy on dual-mode of programmes (online and Campus based) to ensure continuous learning among tertiary institutions as a measure against any unforeseen contingency. This will keep private universities in business at all times without disrupting the academic calendar by employing the best practices of online learning options.

Further research to explore the management of quality assurance systems of higher institutions in the developed nations is recommended. Ghanaian institutions should research on institutions abroad who are doing well in QA to enable them to evaluate how to improve their systems. Studying the practices and experiences from these countries can expand understandings and offer ideas of what to do in Ghana. Thus, institutions in Ghana could gain a great deal by learning from the concrete experiences and practices of the institutions and countries with more QA experiences. This may assist in the identification and hybridization of a better model or structure of internal quality assurance management systems for higher institutions in Ghana.

In relation to the above, it is also recommended that tertiary institution in Ghana should continuously self-review their quality systems every other year as a guide by selecting institutions that are comparable in their purposes of operation to act as formal or informal benchmarking partners.

Conclusions

The methodology used in this study also had limitations taking into consideration relatively small number of participants making it vulnerable to validity threat. Therefore, it is recommended that future research could be conducted on a larger sample of diverse participants drawn from wider scope of institutions. Similarly, this study was limited to a qualitative approach and would benefit from a quantitative methodology.

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