

## Quality Assurances Practices in Private Universities: A Literature Review

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### **Abstract**

*The study takes a critical review of existing literature on quality assurance practices among private universities. Taking a content and descriptive analytical approach, the papers presents the theoretical, conceptual and empirical thoughts on Quality Assurance Practices in Private Universities. One line of arguments that run through the paper is that QAPs is a strategic performance management that can be effectively used to guarantee the accomplishment of organisational core values. Though QAPs differ from institutions to institutions, its goals remain same.*

**Keywords:** *Quality Assurance Practices, Education, Private Universities, Accreditation, performance*

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### **Introduction**

Quality Assurance Practices (QAPs) has become an important component of the operations of academic and industrial establishments. As an aspect of internal and external performance management mechanism, it deals with maintaining standard in service delivered and institutional image sustainability. Quality Assurance Practices are organically tied to the vision, mission and values of private and public organisations such that a compromise of any of its essential components will affect the core values of the organisation and society in general. Quality Assurances can be located in every field of man's endeavor. Biblically, God Almighty emphasized quality assurance when He instructed Moses in the book of Exodus chapter 26: 30 to build the Ark of God according to the pattern that was revealed to him on the mount.

Quality Assurance Practices (QAPS) in higher education of learning can be viewed as a performance management strategy, which entails among others, the systematic evaluation and review of educational provision and services rendered by educational institutions and staff in order to maintain and possibly improve on equity, quality, effectiveness and efficiency for the overall benefit of the society. In a more domesticated and practical manner, this may sometimes involve self-assessment, external evaluation and monitoring (including periodic accreditation exercises and inspection), the evaluation of academic staff, facilities, and student assessments.

Given its strategic place in ensuring standardization in educational services and output in the society and the world in general, Quality Assurances Practices are statutory requirements for public and private universities that are key providers of higher education services in the world. It is this strategic importance of QAPs that has informed a review of existing literature on Quality Assurances Practices in private universities. Private universities are one of the key providers of higher education services in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic which ravaged the world has altered work dynamic and social

fabrics of the workplace (Agba, Ocheni, Agba, 2020). Though several studies have been done on quality assurance and other numerous literature on both public and private universities at the global and national fronts, it appeared there were no review of literature on *quality* assurance practices on the Private Universities. This among others engendered the need for a quality assurance review in higher education of learning. The methodology adopted in the paper is essentially a qualitative and content analysis approach.

The study is inclined to boost research activities on private universities and foster meaningful discussions around the subject at high level investigation and technology in the knowledge economy (Tsevi, 2014).

A key limitation of this study is its limited in scope as it can be enlarged to include both public universities of Ghana to ensure a large representation of universities in Ghana in the development of the national policy

### **Theoretical Background**

#### **Effectiveness of Quality Assurance Practices**

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 various ways to describe 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 some diverse processes of assessing QA in different institutions with a view to establishing the effects of QA on higher education:

In his study, Cheng (2010) used theoretical sampling to select 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 designed and executed (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).

Another important QA instrument is the student. A good tool for assessing quality enhancement in the university is the students' appraisal of academic programs which enable students gain good experiences when allowed to participate in external evaluation panels and QA processes (Stukalina, 2014). Thus, 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). In support of students participation in QA evaluation, Alaniska et al. (2006) confirmed that as stakeholders in higher education, students

invest time and money in the system and have a special interest in the quality of the academic program. However, according to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), finding qualified students to participate in QA processes (2006) could be difficult. For instance, language and cultural issues pose challenges to the involvement of students as QA instrument (Alaniska et al., 2006). More so, students who do not participate in faculty or institutional boards may lack the necessary implicit competencies to participate in quality assurance evaluations.

In spite of the challenges, the benefits for involving students in QA processes can be grouped into two categories: benefit to the student and benefit to the QA process (Elassy, 2013). Some of the benefits to the students include sharpening of their analytical abilities of the quality of the programmes, and creating a sense of ownership of these programs (Education, 2009). In addition, the fact that students are at the center of higher education, and invest time and money in the system, it is paramount to involve them to improve QA processes. Students have a multidimensional understanding of quality in higher education and provide an important lens for quality assurance in higher education.

The quality of education students receive at the tertiary level is a reflection of the quality of graduates in the labour market (Belash et al., 2015). That is, the natures of the operations of universities are linked to their products such that as direct customers of the educational services after completing their studies, become the products in the labour market.

Similarly, Uysal (2015) argued that measuring students or graduates' satisfaction with Higher Educational Institutions services could assist the individual institutions identify their weaknesses that might need improvement and build on their strengths.

In relation to students' productivity in the QA process, Malcom Baldrige administers 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).

### **Online Programmes and Quality Assurance**

As students and scholars move across regional and national boundaries at high rates, QA has become an international endeavor and a key component of higher education policies in many countries. In a study, Ramírez (2014) discovered that three factors influence the quality assurance trends in international higher education: growing much more competitive and rigorous than ever before; Secondly, becoming regionally recognized; and the need for an international quality assurance framework with acknowledgement and reciprocity across countries.

### **Quality Matters (QM)**

As Quality assurance becomes more significant, Quality Matters (QM) program offers a systematic quality assurance process for the design of online programs. QM is central peer-based in quality assurance for continuous development of online educational programmes for student which is a general set of principles used for the design of online and blended courses at the tertiary level. QM provides fundamental tools and processes used to evaluate quality in course design (Matters, 2014).

The QM Rubric is a set of eight (8) joint standards and forty-one (41) specific standards used to evaluate the design of online and blended courses. The QM Rubric is comprehensively loaded with comments that explain the application of the standards and the relations among them offers a systematic QA process for the design of online programs with a scoring system and set of online tools facilitate the assessment by a team of peer reviewers (Pollacia & McCallister, 2019; Matters, 2014). With the increased international higher education, many people have concerns about quality, and more than 700 colleges and universities subscribe to the nonprofit QM program (Matters, 2014). QM subscribers include community and technical colleges and universities and other academic institutions. The QM process is a quality assurance framework for continuous improvement in online learning and provides effective professional development for faculty and distance education. However, QM is not a total solution because it lacks benchmarks to determine the quality of delivery and instructor and faculty engagement (Matters, 2014).

### **Quality Assurance Models**

Jamieson (2008) underscored the three perceived prominent approaches of quality assurance in Tertiary Institutions as the Control or Command Model, the Self-Regulation Model, and the Market Regulation Model. Quality assurance systems just like general reforms do not operate in isolation; rather they operate and respond to a range of factors, principles and directions that update the scope of higher education reforms in a given context (Mhlanga, 2008). This shows that changes in higher education today seem to be affected by forces originating from three main sources: the state, the market (in society) and the culture of the higher educational institution itself. The tension that exists between the varying interests of the state, the market and the institution itself has a bearing on the quality assurance systems that eventually prevail. According to Cloete et al. (2002), the role of a higher educational institutions today mirrors at the collection of different interest groups as a result of the increasing number of university stakeholders with competing interests in university affairs.

From the above literature, the three major models of quality assurance in higher education are: the Command and Control Model, the Self-regulation Model, and the Market Regulation Model (Okae-Adjei, 2012; Mhlanga, 2008; Jamieson, 2008). The classic triangle of coordination suggested three principal modes for coordinating behaviour in academic institutions sought to propose that the state, academy, and the market are the primary forces influencing quality in Higher Education. This model is therefore utilised to determine how tertiary institutions are driven and how impactful each force is in relation to the steering of these systems.

### **Command and Control Model**

Jamieson (2008) observed that the Control Model is an effort by the state to control Higher Educational Institutions with standards to ensure quality in Higher Education such 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 university institutions efficiency, quality and accountability.

These affect institutions quite differently in terms of institutional autonomy and reforms pursued in the higher education system in general. Also, the state control strips the universities of their academic freedom and autonomy to exercise their freedom of enquiry. 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). In this case the state has authoritarian procedures and standards to ensure quality in HEIs.

### **Self-Regulation Model**

The Self-Regulation Model reveals that higher educational institutions are autonomous and have the power to design their own curricula and grant their own degrees; and that higher institutions are entrusted to professionals who ensure that right things are done or quality is maintained. The Self-Regulation Model reveals that higher educational institutions are autonomous and have the power to design their own curricula and grant their own degrees; and that higher institutions are entrusted to professionals who ensure that right things are done or quality is maintained. In the Self-regulation Model, tertiary institutions are autonomous; they design their own curricula and award their own degrees. Tertiary institutions are ruled by professionals who are trusted with doing the right things. Traditionally, universities are unique organisations who have protected their role of knowledge generation and propagation, a cherished academic autonomy and their ivory tower status to teach students to advance human learning through production. The act of inquiry is central and pervasive for all institutions of higher education. 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 (Mhlanga, 2008).

A stakeholder university is an institution that identifies and establishes strategic relations with partners such as foundations, funding agencies, professional bodies, government, the business sector and charities. According to Ramirez (2014), that type of university is termed a socially-embedded as opposed to a buffered university. Such universities are well-networked in the turbulent and volatile economies as a deliberate strategy to survive in an environment where government subsidy is continually diminishing. Thus, relationships with employers, organizations and professional bodies have to be 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 such that considering the interests of the different stakeholders in making strategic choices and decisions requires complex accountability (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. Both public and private Institutions compete for clients, strive to enroll as many students as possible, develop a variety of full-time and part-time courses etc. being mindful of quality delivery. The best institutions flourish and the worst fails because universities are run more and more like corporate enterprises, the market discourse influences an instrumental approach to quality assurance in higher educational institutions. 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.

It is worthwhile to note that the encroachment of market ideologies into higher education has resulted in academic units in universities operating as profit centers. Their success is very much judged in terms of their ability to generate funds for the institution. This practice has obvious implications for the type of programmes that academic units offer and the numbers they choose to enroll in order to meet certain financial targets. Thus, academic values are usually quality in their programme offerings; quantity and economic values than with reforms. According to Lim (2010), this approach begins by forming a mission for the institution, followed by functions that have to be carried out to achieve this mission, with the objectives of each function being set out. Though it is good working towards the achievement of organizational missions and objectives, Lim (2010), argument is that this influential approach is too mechanical to be meaningful in an educational organisation. The hunt of such missions and purposes is done in such an administrative manner that inherent epistemic values of an institution are compromised. Besides, by adopting such an instrumental approach, the quality assurance activities of an institution seek to achieve the pre-stated aims and objectives of an institution and by so doing a somewhat narrow view of quality assurance is pursued.

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 model due to the fact that the types of services and the quality frameworks the agencies use vary from one QA organization to another (Asif et al., 2013).

### **Conceptual Review**

This paper offers a qualitative research view on private universities perception of quality assurance in the Bono Region of Ghana taking into perspective the employability of past students, using different approaches of quality assurance and program accreditation. The research works conducted at the various universities in Ghana facilitated the adaptation of responding to the call from industry to produce the graduates they need to drive their organizations and produce products and services needed by the ever modernizing competitive industry and economy.

### **Concepts of Quality and Quality Assurance Perspective**

#### **Quality**

The term quality is multidimensional, differently interpreted by different stakeholders, such as governments, employers, students, administrators, lecturers, etc. (Tammara, 2005). In high education, quality is a challenging task, highly debatable concept and a matter of personal judgment yet, none of the definitions is universally accepted (Doherty, 2008). It compresses the concept of meeting commonly agreed values or standards. Such standards may be defined by law, an institution, a regulatory/coordinating body or a professional society. According to Newton (2002), quality was imported from a more familiar industrial and commercial settings in the 1980s into the domain of High Education and also to other professional and public service settings. In their effort to establish what quality is, Dicker, Garcia, Kelly, and Mulrooney (2019) clarified that universities need to be articulated with what staff and students define as high significance. They found out 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 teachers personal qualities of their profession such as general personal qualities, kindness, leadership, and general attitude; and 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 revealed that students' responses reflect 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 also determine how well a projected plan will be executed to guarantee the quality of education. The human resource management tools play important roles in developing the teachers, supporting changes in the organizational culture, and preparing managers, leaders, and academic personnel for the higher educational institutions (Kohont & Nadoh Bergoc, 2010). All the four dimensions determine the quality of higher education. Most of the definitions do not seem to apply to Higher Education. For example the dimension of quality as perfection cannot be applicable since Higher Education does not aim to produce defect free graduates (Watty, 2003).

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. It sums up the concept of meeting commonly agreed precepts or standards. Such standards may be defined by law, an institution, a coordinating body or a professional society. In the diverse arena of higher education, fitness for purpose varies tremendously by field and programme. Universities are working with industry through various university-industry linkages to seek their inputs. Quality education enable countries achieve sustainable development through improved training in higher level, the skills of their human capitals by sharpening the minds of the individual to transform the society economically, socially and politically (Ashraf, Osman, & Ratan, 2016). As noted by Varghese (2004b), unlike public universities, many private universities are self-financing and have operational goals and orientation of profit generating. As such they offer courses that have a premium both in the education of market and the employment of graduates. Thus, success of these institutions depends on their ability to respond quickly to such response.

### **Quality Assurance**

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.

Quality assurance drives higher institutions to achieve excellence in education. Nevertheless, the major challenges in many private universities has been ensuring that the quality of educational programs meets local and international standards concurrently (Blackmur, 2007). Quality assurance systems could become an effective means of identifying weaknesses in institutional operations and taking intervention steps to improve service delivery to customers and students. Studies on how to improve service delivery in public and private organisation has become one of the major concern of scholars in Africa and other developing countries (Agba, Ogwu & Chukwurah, 2013). Till now, quality has no mutual definition and this calls for the cooperation of QA agencies review decisions.

### **Common QA approaches of High Education Institutions**

There are many different ways to illustrate quality in education:

#### **(a) Quality Audit**

Quality audit denotes an independent and logical investigation that seeks to determine whether activities and related outcomes comply with planned schedules and whether the schedules are effectively implemented to achieve the goals (AUQA, 2005). Quality audit tries to verify the extent to which institutions fulfill their own objectives (Woodhouse, 1999). It is an evaluation of the quality assurance instruments to see whether the institution is suitable for its stated purpose. The time frame for an effective audit usually involves a panel visit of three or more days. Yet, in some cases visits have been too short for a comprehensive evaluation.

The process of academic auditing started in the United Kingdom institutions and due to its benefit other countries such as Ghana embraced it. Rather audits focus on those processes implemented by higher education providers in order to assure and improve the quality of teaching and learning (Dill, 2000). It should be noted that a well applied quality audit in an institution is an indication of continuous quality improvement. It has been noted that most quality audit processes urge institutions into self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses to take corrective action.

#### **(b) Benchmarking**

Benchmarking is systematic process for measuring and comparing the work practices of an organization to those of another, by bringing an external focus to internal activities or operations (Kempner & Shafer 1993). To Meade (1998), benchmarking refers to the structured and formal method of searching for practices of excellent performance, the observation and exchange of information about those practices to meet the needs of one's own organization, and their implementation. It tries to answer questions such as: how well the institution is doing compared to others; who is doing it right? How to be better than the best? Thus, benchmarking is a process that provides higher institutions with objective measurements for goal-setting to enable them to track the set targets positively (Shafer & Coate, 1992). Benchmarking can be an effective diagnostic instrument by suggesting alternative solutions for higher education providers and can provide private universities with specific performance targets to measure their performance against rather than speculation of what needs to be done. Universities have much to gain through the introduction of benchmarking practices in their operations. For instance, the process assists institutions to categorize and comprehend the drivers of processes as well as outputs and quality. Thus, managers gain institutions with external point of reference or standard for evaluating the quality and cost of their organization's internal activities, practices, and processes. However, benchmarking is a cost to an institution both in terms of funds and human resources, so it should be well designed and executed with much care to enable the institution to achieve the desired outcome. Where an institution secures



the appropriate and relevant data for benchmarking, the commitment of the staff and the financial capabilities of the institution may hinder its efficient implementation.

### **(c) Accreditation**

Accreditation is a review undertaken to verify whether an institution or a programme meet the standard set up by the accrediting body. To Dattey, Westerheijden, & Hofman (2014), accreditation is an assessment process which enables a higher education course or institution to be certified as meeting appropriate standards. Accreditation in higher education originated from the United States but has been adopted globally over the years. The evaluation usually results in a constructive or negative outcome although provisional accreditation subject to further requirements is sometimes awarded. The process allows for the evaluation of the total context in which teaching and learning takes place to ascertain where the institution is in order that it can move to where it intends to go (Lenn, 2004). Accreditation may be either of programmes or institutions and provides a license for operation. According to Lenn (2004), Accreditation has two major purposes: to assure the quality of an institution and its programmes; and to assist in their continuous improvement. In Ghana, NAB directs the accreditation systems for both public and private tertiary institutions and specifies minimum standards of higher education.

### **(d) Moderation**

Moderation is the public examination to ensure a rational, valid and reliable assessment. The main aim for moderation of assessment is to determine the timely delivery of standard and consistent between providers. Tertiary institutions are protected by the legislation by granting them the freedom to teach and employ their own methods to assess students in the way they consider best to promote learning. Moderation is on-going at various stages of the programme. Although moderation of assessment attempts to ensure standard assessment is to the required standards, it does not examine what is taught or how.

## **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)**

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). Thus, formal statements are necessary to the expected practice in a university, regarding: program and procedures for quality assurance; approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards; assessment of students; quality assurance of the teaching staff; learning resources and student support; information systems and public information. 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.

### **External Quality Assurance (EQA)**

External quality assurance refers to the national policy framework designed by the state for academic institutions operations to ensure academic standards (Blackmur, 2007). More so, external quality assurance are the actions of external bodies which may be a quality assurance agency or anybody other than the institution that assesses its operations or that of its 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 and system-wide analyses. Vlasceanu, Grünberg, & Parlea (2004) also described external quality assurance 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.

Many scholars have criticized EQA in differing ways. According to Brennan & Shah (2000) there seems to be different approaches to the review process regarding the purpose of evaluation and the national context. To Jeliaskova and Westerheijden (2002) the main result of external quality assurance systems are regarded as bureaucratic procedures and they exert rigid controls over academic institutions. Consequently, Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) also argued that if external QA such as programmes design is very rigid, then higher education institutions may not have the flexibility to respond rapidly or 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). Thus, NAB seeks to ensure that both public and private universities comply with quality assurance regulations to be considered legitimate by the state and the society. NAB instituted the mandatory establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQUA) in tertiary institutions in Ghana as a key tool in assessing the performance of the institutions towards institutional re-accreditation and the grant of a presidential charter within five (5) years of the date of their first accreditation (NAB, 2011).

The functions of the IQUA which the institutions may 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 with NAB including annual reporting; facilitate the development, dissemination and application of quality benchmarks for the various academic and administrative activities of the institution; facilitate the collation and integration of feedback from students and other stakeholders on quality related matters in the institution; act as a link agency by coordinating, documenting and disseminating quality matters; develop and maintain a database on quality related information; prepare annual report on quality assurance of the institution 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).

Considering the above dimensions, there is the need to identify which characteristics make the staff and students of Catholic University College of Ghana, Fiapre and that of Methodist University College of Ghana, Wenchi perceive QA differently; the impact as well as employability of their

products. Therefore, this study employs qualitative research approach to identify the research gaps and to investigate the above.

### **Empirical Studies**

This section presents a review of relevant studies and contributions of some authors on the practices of Quality Assurance among private higher institutions of Ghana with diverse viewpoints. The literature on tertiary education quality assurance indicates that improvement and accountability are believed to be the two main purposes of national quality assurance agencies. 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). The paper observed the reasons and consequences for the growth of private higher education in Ghana. Among others, a common feature found amongst private universities was reliance on part-time lecturers which result 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. The result of the examination intended to assist the Institution to review the services provided and to improve upon the quality of the educational programmes in an effort to meet the expectations of the stakeholders. It revealed that the grandaunts 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.

### **Challenges of QA Practices of Private High Education Institutions**

One challenge of quality assurance appraisals is faculty members and other stakeholders' concerns about the QA process. An investigation of faculty beliefs and their plans to participate in the peer quality assurance reviews using the Quality Matters Rubric using a qualitative approach, Schwegler, Altman, and Bunkowski (2014) examined faculty members' perceptions of completing the QA peer review. Although faculty was doubtful before participating in the QA process, the results indicate that many of the concerns and criticisms of the peer review process did not validate earlier assumptions. The study examined faculty beliefs, instead of rumors, to identify specific faculty concerns that could be directly addressed. The results, though limited due to small sample size, stated online course quality is an important goal, and, with plans for expansion, an established standard (such as the QM rubric) requires scientific inquiry for appropriate and improved application of the standard (Schwegler et al., 2014).

Efforts aimed at improving the quality of higher education service delivery are severely constrained by factors including economic, political, academic and administrative issues such as under funding of the educational sector; deteriorating working conditions, staff developmental needs (Agba, 2015;

Bunoti, 2011). It is further observed that increased private universities with different programmes and varying quality frameworks (lack of cultural sensitivity in the educational system) have been key hindrances to having a common platform of quality control (Gift, Leo- Rhynie, & Moniquette, 2006; Smith, 2010). Without doubt, higher educational institutions in developing countries could be at a disadvantage in transnational education and the establishment of a set of minimum standards (practicing of QA) because of their capacity to participate effectively in the global trading system (Woodhouse & Stella, 2011). According to Stella and Gnanam (2004), digital learning and the integration of technology also pose a challenge in quality assurance of high education services as a result of the increasing amount of digital educational offerings (Baumgardt, 2013).

The tertiary sector has varied views on the suitability of quality standards. For example, there is a range of opinions about the value of international conditions for quality assurance of higher education because such standardization may not necessarily improve the quality of the academic programs and may threaten the integrity of the countries' higher education systems (Morgan & Shahjahan, 2014). Prospective students expect the quality assurance agencies to provide more information about the quality of those educational services to make intelligent choices such that the facilities of most institutions are inadequate. To buttress that point, Varghese (2004) reiterated that the goals and orientation of the operation of private universities are different from that of the public institutions.

Since many students are self-financing and profit generating, they have to offer courses that have premium both in the education market and the employment of graduates. The success of these institutions depends upon their ability to respond quickly to such needs. For instance, quality teaching and learning is dependent on the quality and quantity of human and material resources of the institution. Concerns about the QA process reflect another challenge in itself: creating a quality culture. All stakeholders within an institution need to share a vision as to what quality is and choose a management model to improve overall quality and maintain continuous improvement.

### **Scope and Key Performance Indicators of Quality Assurance**

Tertiary institutions are fundamental 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 to national development. Thus, it is only quality education that can sharpen the minds of the individual and help 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 (reference to the labour market), 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, in the form of accreditation and 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 Consistency:** This opinion of quality sees quality as reliable and faultless outcome. This idea means there should be a Zero error. As higher education does not aim at producing standardized, free of defects graduates, this view of quality is not really applicable to higher education (Watty, 2003).

**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 fulfilling their 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 in order to ensure improvements (Stensaker, 2007).

**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 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. Thus, transformation enables students develop and improve upon their knowledge, abilities and skills in the university through the provision of an educational experience.

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).

### **University Features**

Private universities are organizations with complex characteristics that can influence the adoption and application of diverse policies such as quality assurance. Universities are distinguished by the following elements: leadership and governance, staff and students characteristics, age, size, location and quality culture (Kahsay, 2012). Each of these elements is briefly described as follows.

### **Leadership and Governance**

According to Harvey and Foster (2007), leadership is an art of influencing human behavior towards organizational goals and is important in promoting a culture of quality throughout the university. It is an organizational factor which can influence the effectiveness of quality assurance practice in universities in significantly. A major organizational element that draws distinction between

successful and unsuccessful organizations is the effectiveness of leadership and governance (Ellis, 2018).

### **Organizational Size**

The size of organization of private universities refers to the students enrolled, number of teaching and non-teaching, staff, infrastructure, land size and the visibility of an institution to a variety of external stakeholders. It is an important factor affecting the structure and processes of an organization (Bastedo, 2006). Harrison, Hitt, Hoskisson, and Ireland (2001) maintained that large organizations have more slack resources for new projects and diversification, greater challenges and more opportunities for promotion and growth among their employees and more control over the external environment. Whilst small organizations are said to be more innovative because they are more flexible, have greater ability to adapt and improve, and demonstrate less difficulty accepting and implementing change (Damanpour, 1996).

### **Organizational Age**

In organizational practices, though there are no clear evidences regarding the relationship between age and quality assurance practices. In private universities, age is associated with experience and capacity of organizations. Both institutions (Methodist University College of Ghana and Catholic University College of Ghana) had been in existent for more than ten (10) years; and not chartered. The key participants had also worked in the university for ten (10) years or more.

### **Staff and Students**

The staffs of the university are made up of academic and administrative. However, the academic staff and students are the main actors that directly influence the attainment of the goal of universities and they play key role for a successful implementation of quality assurance in private universities. The academic personnel in universities are key resources and their performance largely determines the quality of the student experience of higher education (Rowley, 1996). Similarly, students' feedback on the quality experiences also plays an important role in improving the quality of education in private universities. Put differently, there is need to decentralize quality assurances practices such that every stakeholder is accommodated in the chain of assessment. Decentralisation in Quality Assurances Practices can indeed foster quality service delivery in sectors like health, education, agriculture, etc. (Ocheni & Agba, 2018). In his study, Prakash (2018) threw more lights on the importance of quality in High Education Institutions.

### **Quality Culture**

Quality is the conformance to requirements or the ways of doing things according to set standard operating procedures that develop over time inside an organization. The culture of an organization is associated with shared norms, values, beliefs, assumptions, and meanings of individuals participating in the organization (Tierney, 1988). The importance of quality culture in private higher education stems from the general interest in the culture of organizations (Kahsay, 2012). In organizational studies in higher education, there is no universally accepted meaning of the concept. Rather, Organizational culture is perceived as an independent variable that can affect student life, administration, and curriculum" (Maassen, 1996). This means that quality and its assurance are culturally embedded. Thus, the concept of ' quality culture' acmes that structure and policies alone are not enough to enhance quality in private universities (Rahnuma, 2020).

### **Summary and Concluding Remarks**

The theoretical basis of QAPs and the conceptual review undertaken in this paper has highlighted the key variables needed to produce quality manpower in terms of quality graduates needed by the ever-modernizing competitive industry and economy. This study adopted Materu's (2007)

conception of quality and quality assurance that defined quality as ‘fitness for purpose’ and summed up the concept of Quality Assurance as meeting the operational objectives of the varied arena of higher education. Fitness for purpose differs tremendously by field and programme vis a vis the suitability of quality standards in the industry in achieving specific institutional goals. The empirical review also revealed the contributions of some authors on the practices of Quality Assurance among private higher institutions. In conclusion, it is important to establish, maintain and sustain a quality assurance unit in every institution of learning. QAPs remains one of the assured means to achieving the core values of organisations.

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