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Quality Assurance Practice in Distance Education in Public Tertiary Educational Institutions: A Case Study of University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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Abstract:

Quality Assurance and management practice has become one of the most effective tools to mitigate and enhance the challenges pose to quality delivery of distance education in Ghana. However, there are no enough research findings to catalogue the quality assurance practices of distance education in all tertiary institutions in Ghana, especially, the College of Distance Education to ensure that stakeholders maintain legitimacy with the labour market, National Accreditation Board, and professional bodies. This study therefore examined how quality assurance practices are undertaken in distance education in public tertiary educational institutions in Ghana with respect to standards set by the National Accreditation Board (NAB) using College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast (CoDE-UCC) in the Central Region of Ghana. The study adopted qualitative approach using case study design. The data sources for this case study consisted of interviews with key informants and institutional policy documents. Documentary analysis was used primarily to answer the research questions about formal written QA policies, while interviews sought to build understanding of the knowledge and views of key people who developed and carried out these policies. From the results, it was realized that there were clear quality assurance policies adopted and implemented in the Co DE-UCC. It was also realized that quality assurance programmes are in place for monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance programmes. Some of the challenges were that there were no adequate budgetary allocation for quality assurance, inadequate qualified staff in quality assurance, and lack of periodic training for staff. The study concluded that though, the College of Distance Education had an internal quality assurance policy, but there were no adequate qualified staff in place for monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance programmes. The study therefore, suggested that the College of Distance Education should recruit more qualified quality assurance staff and organise periodic in-service training programmes for the staff.

Keywords: Quality, quality assurance, distance education, management, practice

1. Introduction

The emergence of Distance Education (DE) has inevitably led to increase in participation of higher education across the globe. According to Guri-Rosenblit (2005), universities that deliver distance education learning have opened regional and various study centers and campuses outside conventional universities. Dhanarajan (2010) and Moore and Kearsley (2012) reported that many of these universities are enjoying economies of scale leading to increase in enrolments. Moore and Kearsley (2012) went on to disclose that although there are differences in distance education, the universities that run distance education programmes share an important similarity, which is single mode distance institutions. According to Peters (2008), single mode distance education universities are referred to as such for the purpose of offering distance education only such as the Open University of United Kingdom (UKOU).

Moreover, scholars of distance education such as Moore and Kearsley (2012) have argued that distance education universities have the advantage of providing extended access and meeting the rising expectations of people who would not be able to attend traditional campus-based universities. In many developing countries, as governments are trying to meet the rising expectations and public demand to upgrade the skills for the next generation and economic growth, distance education has become an important element to provide access and equity to higher education (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007; Belawati, Zuhairi, & Wardani, 2012).

Notwithstanding the crucial role of distance education universities in providing access to higher education, there are several challenges that these universities face which include but not limited to human resource. Some of these challenges include; lack of support and services such as providing tutors, academic advisors, schedulers, and technical assistance (Rena, 2007), difficulty in oversight of delivery of instruction (Rashid & Rashid, 2012), and delivery of student support services including academic and logistical elements or establishing infrastructure (Inglis, 2003; Hoosen & Butcher, 2012). These challenges led to the view by some scholars that distance education has had been burdened with an image

problem and regarded as poor, quality and substandard (Daniel, 2012; Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010) leading to the stigma and conclusion that distance education universities deliver a second rate education.

The challenges faced by distance education universities have attracted the attention of many and call for an examination of the quality of distance education in public tertiary institutions. This should take into consideration the need for establishing acceptable best practices and developing standards of quality by which distance education can be judged (Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010). In this regard, ensuring Quality Assurance (QA) in Higher Education (HE) has become a major concern for educationist, governments, policy makers, and quality assurance practitioners over the years. Internationally and nationally, there is continuing debate as to what constitute quality assurance, proper roles and forms of quality assurance in higher education (Ogunji, 2011). This interest in quality assurance in higher education has led to several agencies and commissions on quality assurance in higher education to be instituted across the world with the World Bank playing a key role in most of these projects (World Bank, 2011). These include the National Commission for University Evaluation and Accreditation (NEAU) of Argentina (1991), the National Council on Accreditation and Academic Titles and Degrees, the Higher Education Financing Council and University Research Council of Romania (1994), the European Commission Supported Pilot Project on Education Evaluation (1991 and 1995), the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA) (Beaton et al., 1996; Martin et al., 1997), the Board of the South African Council on Higher Education (2002), the Philippines Professional Regulation Commission on Education (2004), and the German Accreditation Council (1999).

Since the introduction of the concept of quality assurance into educational management philosophy and service delivery, quality assurance conversations have evolved from an initial questioning of whether new quality assurance reforms were needed to current debates on the most effective, comprehensive and sustainable approaches to quality assurance in higher education (El-khawas & Lauritz, 1998; El-khawas & Shah, 1998). Peters (1996) asserts that quality assurance measures processes in educational delivery to ensure intervention that provides value added products instead of just inspecting the end product. To this end, products mean the graduates and the knowledge created or disseminated during the learning period or the period of research. In contributing to this discourse of quality assurance in higher education, Blackmore (2004) identifies the quality assurance standards of United Kingdom (UK) higher educational institutions to include internal cycles of planning, auditing, verification, recording, actions and evaluation of the actions to meet the expectation of stakeholders.

According to Yorke (1999), globalization as an issue in higher education projects, has an inherent relationships between national competitiveness and the responsibility of higher education institutions to generate quality knowledge to mitigate the challenges posed by globalization. This view expressed by Yorke (1999) reinforces the question of the quality of graduates from Ghanaian tertiary institutions over the past two decades. Until the late 1990s, tertiary education at the university level was provided by University of Ghana (Legon), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) with an off campus at Tarkwa, University of Cape Coast, University of Education, Winneba, and University for Development Studies. Currently, there are several institutions of higher learning across the length and breadth of the country that offer tertiary education. This has brought about increasing number of students pursuing higher education. The increasing number of students entering into public universities as a result of the educational reforms of 1987 at the basic and secondary levels was premise on the globalised economy.

In order to fulfil the demands of an effective educational system of providing quality middle level manpower to contribute to the economic fortunes of the nation, Polytechnic education was added to the stock of public tertiary institutions in Ghana. The increased number of public tertiary institutions as well as private tertiary institutions could not solve the problem of high student numbers as there are limited academic facilities, faculty and supporting staff. These have exerted pressure on academic facilities, lecturers and supporting staff resulting in perceived decline of the quality of graduates and knowledge creation. The quest for profitability in Higher Education (HE) delivery by private tertiary institutions entice the institutions to admit more students beyond the student-teacher ratio standards set by the National Accreditation Board. The lack of required educational facilities such as libraries, lecture halls and congenial learning environment put the issue of quality to question.

More so, in the Ghanaian public tertiary institutions, insufficient and undue delays of government subvention have led the institutions to generate funds internally to augment government's subvention. This is done by categorizing admissions into full fee paying and non-full fee paying students. This situation is aggravated when these public institutions now run sandwich programmes, distance education programme and short courses with the same staff strength. To enable these tertiary institutions to function effectively, the National Accreditation Board (NAB) was established in 1993 to regulate tertiary institutions to ensure quality delivery. To discharge this mandate effectively, NAB requires all tertiary institutions to set up quality assurance units with clear quality assurance policies to maintain quality delivery in the tertiary institutions.

Even though, previous researchers posit that quality has discretionary description depending on the stakeholder, it is important to standardize how a particular institution or institutional regulator such as National Accreditation Board (NAB) defines, describes, and compose quality. Quality Assurance is the standardized institutional benchmark that constitutes what is quality. Materu (2007) therefore, explains that each regulatory body of tertiary institution defines what it considers as quality to assure itself that the institutions are conforming to such standards. Furthermore, Materu (2007) defines Quality Assurance (QA) as a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced. It is equally important to appreciate the fact that, with globalization, there is both internal and external quality assurance.

More so, Quality Assurance has been integrated in tertiary educational system in Ghana with the establishment of the National Accreditation Board. The board imposes on tertiary institutions to establish quality assurance units to ensure quality which is subject to peer review by other institutions and confirmation visits by the National Accreditation Board. Watty (2003) suggests that the dimension of quality as perfection can be removed, since higher education does not aim to produce defect-free graduates. Lomas (2001) suggests that fitness for purpose and transformation seem to be the two most appropriate definitions of quality, according to small-scale research with a sample of senior managers in higher education institutions.

2. Problem Statement

Over the years public universities in Ghana are faced with the challenge of providing quality education to increasing number of students. According to Safu (2005), enrolment figures in higher education institutions in Ghana grew from 11,857 in 1991/92 academic year to 63,576 in 2003/2004 academic year indicating a growth rate of 400 percent within twelve years. In the 2012/2013 academic year, the total enrolment increased to 842,587 (MoE, 2014). This increasing trend in enrolment can be observed for the rest of the years. This phenomenon, described as a kind of massification by Mohamedbhai (2008) has serious implications for academic quality in higher education. The requirement of the National Accreditation Board is that the student-lecturer ratio should be one lecturer to eighteen students in a class with acceptable facilities. The increasing numbers pose challenges to public universities in the delivery of quality education. This has led to the introduction of distance education programme by most of the universities in Ghana including University of Cape Coast.

As a result of this, Quality Assurance (QA) has become the most effective tool to mitigate and enhance the challenges pose to quality delivery of education. This can be done by establishing acceptable best practices and developing standards of quality by which distance education can be objectively judged (Davies et al., 2010). There is scant research-based literature to guide policymakers, managers, and practitioners in applying QA in education (Jung & Latchem, 2012), resulting in the quality of distance education being described as "an uncharted area for many QA agencies" (Stella & Gnanam, 2004, p. 150).

However, there are no enough research findings to catalogue the quality assurance of all tertiary institutions in Ghana, especially, the distance education in public tertiary educational institutions such as College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast distance education center to ensure that stakeholders maintain legitimacy with the labour market, and National Accreditation Board. It is not well known if the public universities and distance education units of University of Cape Coast conform fully to quality assurance and enhancement standards provided by the NAB or they go beyond what is required by NAB, also to know whether the universities have set international standards to meet the needs of international stakeholders.

It is therefore important to study quality assurance at university-level in distance education, in particular as these institutions play such a vital role in regional development and innovation. Therefore, to fill this research gap, this study therefore attempt to do a critical study of quality assurance in distance education in public tertiary educational institutions in Ghana with respect to standards set by the National Accreditation Board (NAB) using College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how quality assurance practices are undertaken in distance education in public tertiary educational institutions in Ghana with respect to standards set by the National Accreditation Board (NAB) using College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast. The primary aim of this study is to explore how Quality Assurance practices are used and the importance of Quality Assurance in Distance Education in public tertiary institutions and to come out with specific challenges associated with quality assurance in Ghanaian public tertiary institutions as well as find possible solutions to these challenges to be adopted by policy makers.

4. Research Objectives

Specifically, the study sought to:

- Assess how Quality Assurance practices are implemented in the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast;
- Examine the importance of Quality Assurance and enhancement practices being implemented in the College of Distance Education;
- Examine challenges associated with Quality Assurance practices implemented in the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast; and
- Suggest possible solutions to challenges associated with quality assurance to be adopted by policy makers.

4.1. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How is Quality Assurance practices implemented in the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast?
2. What is the importance of Quality Assurance and enhancement practices being implemented in the College of Distance Education?
3. What are challenges associated with Quality Assurance in the College of Distance Education?

5. Scope of the Study

The study is limited to the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast as a result of inadequate current research work on quality assurance and management practices in distance education in Ghana. Respondents in this study may only come from experienced faculty members such as quality assurance officers, examination officers, faculty officers, and Heads of Departments of the College of Distance Education, which may not provide a very accurate picture of what pertains on the ground with respect to general issues of quality assurance in the various learning centers. However, other group of people such as students and course tutors of the College of Distance Education may be included as respondents to provide valuable inputs for the study. These people might have contributed immensely towards the validity of the research.

6. Literature Review

This section of the study is designed to acquaint the readers with knowledge on existing studies on the nature of quality assurance practices in distance education in tertiary institutions in Ghana. It attempts to gather information and facts about what other researchers in the field of study and writers have documented, the effects, and some suggestions they have made if any towards the improvement of quality assurance in distance education in tertiary institutions in Ghana. The theoretical framework, conceptual, and empirical reviews for the study are also considered.

6.1. Concept of Quality Assurance

Defining the term quality is one of the challenging tasks and 'repeated mantras' among scholars in the contemporary higher education. According to Harvey and Green (1993) quality in higher education is described as relative, multidimensional and a contextually determined concept. They further identified three (3) key elements of quality in higher education. Fitness for purpose which relates to a particular goal within the national framework for higher education, Value for money which is in relation to how effective and efficient higher education is provided and not necessarily about the cost, and Transformation related to how higher education attainment develops the capabilities of individuals for personal enrichment and contributes to socio-economic development.

From the perspective of Harvey and Green (1993) the products of higher education should experience improvement in their knowledge base and be able to contribute to the national agenda, it is only then that quality can be associated with higher education. Sustaining the stakeholders' views of quality, Harvey and Green (1993) went further and identified five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality.

The transformation concept, as argued by Harvey and Knight (1996), is a meta-quality concept. The other concepts are possible operationalizations of the transformative process rather than ends in themselves. Harvey (2002) suggests that in an era of mass higher education, value-added transformation ought to become the central element of any concept of quality rather than excellence, fitness for purpose or value for money. Similarly, Borge (1998) in defining what quality is in higher education identifies four features of quality. Conformity to specifications, Fitness for use, Achievement of organizational mission and goals, Continuous improvement and multiple factors including reliability, durability and fitness for use.

He further discusses conventional assumptions held about quality in higher education and stated that, it is only high cost higher institutions that provide quality education. That only large higher institution has what it takes to provide quality education; and that only public higher institutions can provide quality education. Finally, only higher institutions with abundant resources can provide quality education.

Materu (2007) on his part defined quality as "fitness for purpose" meaning or conforming to generally accepted standards as defined by an institution, quality assurance bodies and appropriate academic and professional communities. The definition provided by Materu (2007) identifies the purpose of quality in higher education and the various stakeholders of quality in higher education delivery. This definition also presupposes that quality in higher education is about conforming to both internal and external standards in which regulators of tertiary education dictates the external standards. Deducing from Harvey and Green (1993) and Materu (2007), quality in higher education cannot be limited to meaningful contribution to national agenda alone but also to international agenda.

In contributing to quality in higher education, Mishra (2007) explains that information technology helps in all aspects involve in achieving quality in higher education. He argues that quality in higher education depends on effective transmission of knowledge and skills of content, coverage and the depth of information available for reading, teaching and for problem solving which are all enhanced by the appropriate information technology. Furthermore, he argues that in determining quality electronic libraries, electronic teaching aids and intensive application of relevant software are crucially important. According to Kapur and Crowley (2008), quality in higher education is a dynamic concept which implies what is quality yesterday may not be quality today until some improvements are made. This makes quality in Higher Education a continuous process of transforming and adding value to learners and the knowledge acquired by these learners to meet specific and broader needs of the society.

From the above discussions, we can observe that quality is a construct and its meaning is contextual. As Barnett (1999) puts it, what counts, as quality is never neutral and behind it is always a tacit idea of higher education. In other words, the various arguments on what constitutes quality are rooted in the values and assumptions of the different authors about the nature, purpose and fundamental processes of higher education. As Boyle and Bowden (1997) argued, in a context of purposeful organisations and enterprises quality can only be defined in relation to articulated values, purposes, desired processes, experiences and outcomes. Since the purpose of higher education varies and changes across

time, space and context in response to changing environments, so too should the meaning of quality. In this regard, there is a strong support for envisaging quality in terms of 'fitness for purpose' in higher education.

In Ghana, the National Accreditation Boards (NAB) is the governing agency in charge of quality assurance. Wilger (1997) also shares similar views that quality assurance is a collective process by which a university ensures that the quality of educational process is maintained to the standards it has set itself. Contained in these definitions are issues of maintenance and improvement of quality and standards, embedded in the demands for accountability. Most authors on the concept of quality assurance share this view. United Nation Education Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO; 2004), for example, described quality assurance as a systematic review of educational programs to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained.

Similarly, International Network for the Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE; 2005) defined quality assurance as all those attitudes, objects, actions and procedures, which through their existence and use, and together with the quality control activities, ensure that appropriate academic standards are being maintained and enhanced in and by each program. In the same vein, Materu (2007) also defines quality assurance as a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced. In the view of Materu (2007) all inputs of the quality assurance process including infrastructure, faculty and supporting staff are necessary to deliver quality in higher education.

Quality assurance in higher educational institutions has been described by many in different ways. In contributing to this elusive description of quality in higher education, Freeland (1991) explained that stakeholders describe quality in higher education as ambiguous with less precise features even though it is inherent. Stakeholders identify quality with excellence, fitness for a particular purpose, promotion of set targets or goals fulfilment of market and adjustment to global expectations. Bogue (1998) explained that depending on the context in which one looks at quality in higher education, quality may be measurable based on individual judgment, institutional judgment, peer judgment and labour market assessment. This view provides relative or subjective description as to what is quality in higher education. Bogue (1998) further reinforces the description of quality given by Freeland (1991) and put quality into five categories that; there is quality in Higher Education if the products of Higher Education conform to the specifications set out by stakeholders; there is quality in Higher Education if the products of Higher Education are fit for use by the client of Higher Education; there is quality in Higher Education if, tertiary institutions achieve their missions and goals over a period of time; there is quality in Higher Education if there is continuous improvement in previous standards; and there is quality in Higher Education if tertiary education programmes and goals are reliable, durable and conform to environmental needs.

In his seminal work, Garvin (1984) noted five product quality definition approaches, which have been adopted across multiple contexts: the transcendent quality approach, the product-based approach, the user-based approach, the manufacturer-based approach, and the value-based approach. Later, Garvin (1987) adapted his five approaches into eight critical dimensions or categories of quality including: performance, features, reliability, conformance, durability, serviceability, aesthetics, and perceived quality. These notions of quality are relevant to education in that they help provide a heuristic for the ongoing discussions about student preparation, program quality, university rankings, and graduation rates.

6.2. Evolution of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

According to UNESCO (2006), report on higher education, enrolment in tertiary education has grown significantly in the past two decades and was projected to grow even higher in the near future. This was explained to be the product of improved economic transformation and improvement in basic and secondary levels of education. In developing countries, the World Urbanization Prospect Report (2006) also indicated that the main difference in education in developing countries and developed countries is the issue of quality. Thereafter, higher educational institutions and their governments have been challenged to deliver improved quality education as a means of competing in the globalised labour market in Ghana. Mishra (2007) in adapting the UNESCO (2004) framework for understanding Educational Quality, explained the four dimensional linkages involved in quality in higher education. He mentioned them as: Enabling inputs, Learner characteristics, Outcomes, and Context.

Enabling inputs include learning time, teaching methods, assessment, feedback and class size and physical infrastructure. Learner characteristics include aptitude and readiness of the learner to learn. Outcomes include knowledge and skills, creativity, values and social benefits. Context is discussed to include economic labour meant conditions, competitiveness of the teaching profession, national standards, public expectations and globalization. This implies that, in discussing quality assurance and management in higher education, the role of learners should not be discounted. The provision of good and adequate educational infrastructure without linking it with the context available such as National Standards of Public expectations, quality cannot be achieved.

Yorke (1997) made an argument that in higher education, quality assessment, quality assurance, quality managements have been used simultaneously. He further explained that quality assessment in higher education focuses on the internal environment, which has been done already whiles quality assurance focuses on the present internal and external environments with prevention of substance as the main purpose. Blackmore (2004) in contributing to the quality assurance discourse in higher education indicated that quality assurance includes planning, auditing, verification, and recording taking preventive actions and engaging in the evaluation of the process.

Blending the definitions provided by Blackmore (2004), Meteru (2007) and Yorke (1997) it is clear that one cannot discuss quality assurance in higher education without auditing and engagement in academic review. Academic

review is the self-assessment and evaluation of the teaching, learning, research, service and outcomes based on defined examination of the curricula, structure, and effectiveness of a programme as well as the quality and activities of its faculty (Materu, 2007). Audit of an institution is the review to assume whether or not accountability is being achieved. Having misused complex inputs into the determination of what is quality assurance, which includes faculty strength, facilities both physical and technological, what is quality assurance in higher education can best be described as difficult and subjective.

The renewed interest in quality of higher education since the 1980s centered on two questions: one is related to improvement; the extent to which graduates learn the knowledge and skills necessary for a changing economy. The second is related to accountability; the extent to which higher education institutions spending tax money in the right direction (Westerheijden, Stensaker & Rosa, 2007). As Williams (1993) noted, the occurrence of quality management approaches in higher education is a product of the market ideologies of the 1980s and the managerialism that accompanied it. During this time, management of quality was made central to the new discourse on governance of higher education institutions (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Many higher education institutions adopted the quality management models originated in the world of business and industrial production.

Despite the lack of consensus over the concept of quality, formal quality assurance has now become one of the central components of reform and policy instruments to adapt higher education institutions to the increasing expectations from both internal and external stakeholders all over the world. As Reichert (2008) puts it, quality assurance is so widespread and its vocabulary so pervasive nowadays in higher education policy and discourse that one forgets how relatively recent the enthronement of the term "quality" actually is. The quality revolution in higher education has underscored the expectation that universities must demonstrate that they are providing quality education and strives to improve it (Anderson, 2006).

6.3. Expansion of Higher Education

World Bank Edustats (2006) indicated that the gross enrolment in tertiary education grew significantly between 1980 and 2004 and promises to grow further. Between 1980 and 2004 gross enrolment in higher income countries grew from 36% to 67% while less developed countries grew from 1.8% to 8.7 in 2004. The study further indicated that Sub-Saharan Africa grew from 1.7% in 1980 to 5% in 2004. According to Kapur and Crowley (2008), the global tertiary student population increased from 68 million to 132 million in 2004. In developing countries, this was as a result of policy initiatives that help improved enrolment in both basic and secondary educational institutions. At the same time the demand for post-secondary school education had increased significantly. UNESCO Education Counts, WEI (2006) also elaborates that public expenditure on tertiary education in developing countries as a percentage of GDP was very smaller. Hence, funding for higher education has been woefully inadequate.

In supporting the ongoing discussion, Materu (2007) posits that private participation in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa since 2000 has increased tremendously such that about one-third of private institutions provide higher education. Private tertiary institutions are flagged with less quality since they are profit oriented at the same time public tertiary institutions with dwindling investment in infrastructure and faculty have their quality questioned. In order to assure quality in both private and public tertiary institutions, the policy makers introduce quality assurance policies to challenge the institutions to value quality.

6.4. Increase Competition and Rating of Tertiary Education

Kapur and Crowley (2008) posit that, the rating of universities in the world which has found acceptance in Africa put competitive pressure on tertiary institutions in Africa to apply quality management practices all tertiary institutions which then will form the basis of good ranking of such institutions- hence the adoption of quality assurance tenets in especially public tertiary institutions. Mishra (2007) explained that the issues of information technology in the management of libraries, students' reports and thesis, publications of their faculties as well as the use of electronic devices in teaching have all been integrated into the assessment of quality assurance practices in public tertiary institutions worldwide to highlight the relevance ICT.

6.5. Challenges of Quality Assurance Practices in Ghana

Even though the public tertiary institutions have put in place their own internal quality assurance and management policies, quality assurance is seen as a demand by the National Accreditation Board. As a result, all public tertiary institutions have established quality assurance units with some upgrading the unit to the status of a directorate. These directorates generally suffer little or no budgetary allocations, inadequate staff, and no training of quality assurance personnel just to mention but a few. These challenges would have to be addressed by both tertiary institutions themselves and the government in meeting the needs and demands of quality assurance experts.

6.6. Theories of Quality Assurance

In the development trajectory of quality assurance in higher education many models and theories have evolved. These theories are; theory of mission, theory of value added and theory of limited supply. In the theory of quality assurance within mission, the theory values quality as a component of the reputation of higher education and must be integrated in the mission of the university so as to reflect its commitment to quality assurance. Hence, the expression by Bogue (1998) that quality is seen as conformance to the mission of a particular higher educational institution is appropriate.

The Theory of Value-Added tends to emphasize improvement in knowledge and personality of the learner as well as the higher education institution to contribute to national development. According to Van De Lean (2004) legitimacy theory explains why an entity engages in and discloses information to stakeholders. He further explained that the purpose of legitimacy is to receive continuous support from the stakeholders. Tertiary education institutions need the support of all stakeholders especially, students, labour market and policy makers. They can only win their support consistently if they ensure quality assurance practices in a more transparent and accountable way.

6.7. Empirical Literature Review

The review of the existing empirical studies shows that the quality assurance systems and practices in higher education institutions in the Sub-Saharan Africa context and especially Ghanaian tertiary institutions are rarely addressed. As Lim (2001) argues, many developing countries adopted the quality assurance models from the developed countries, and the relevance and usefulness of such models to the specific context of developing countries is still an area of debate. This suggests that analysis of quality assurance systems and practices and their relation to improvement of organizational practices in the context of Ghanaian tertiary institutions is an area of great interest for empirical study.

However, empirical research on the relation between quality assurance processes and improvement of organizational level practices is very scant. There is, for example, a lack of evidence on whether student learning is significantly improving as a result of government policies focusing on the quality of higher education (Stensaker, 2003). A great deal of research work has been conducted in the domain of quality assurance over the past three decades in developed countries. Despite the progress that has been made through research and debate, there is still no universal consensus on how best to manage quality within higher education (Brookes & Becket, 2008). Much of the researches conducted so far focus on how quality could be defined, on the design and relevance of various national quality assurance schemes, on appraising the applicability of industrial models to higher education, on the tension between improvement and accountability in both external and internal quality assurance approaches, and on the effects of such quality assurance processes in higher education in the context of developed countries (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010).

A review of the empirical research studies on quality assurance undertaken by Harvey and Williams (2010) suggests that it is not clear whether quality assurance systems have truly enhanced higher education. This shows that there is lack of universal agreement on the extent to which the adoption of quality assurance in developed countries has generated the desired improvements in the core educational processes of universities.

7. Research Approach

The qualitative research is adopted for this study. Qualitative research, which is in part associated with the epistemological foundation of constructionism, accepts and values the role of the researcher "to seek a deeper understanding and to explore the nuances of experiences not available through quantification" (Darlaston-Jones, 2007, p. 25). Through qualitative research, I intend to explore how QA programmes have been adopted and implemented in distance education.

Qualitative research was adopted for this study and reason being that, it is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honours an inductive style, and a focus on individual meaning and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Creswell, 2007).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describe qualitative research as "multi method in focus involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter... qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them"(p. 2). My reason for choosing qualitative research is that it has several hallmarks.

- It typically involves highly detailed rich descriptions of human behaviours and opinions.
- The perspective is that humans construct their own reality and understanding of what they do may be based on why they believe they do it.
- There is allowance for the "multiple realities" individuals thus might construct in an environment.
- The research question often evolve as the study does, because the research wants to know "what is happening" and may not want to bias the study by focusing on the study too narrowly.

The researcher becomes a part of the study by interacting closely with the subjects (participants) of the study. Researcher attempts to be open to subjects (participants) of "what is" that is researchers are bound by the values and worldviews of the subjects (participants). In doing this, the study employed the case-study research methodology, which attempts to understand phenomena in the social world (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2012). It investigated and analysed the QA programmes of the College of Distance Education (CoDE) for the purpose of gaining insight and collective understanding of how Co DE developed and implemented QA policies, revealing key characteristics of the QA programmes employed by CoDE.

Respondents in this study included experienced faculty members such as quality assurance officers, examination officers, faculty officers, and Heads of Departments of the College of Distance Education. These people are considered to

possessed rich and adequate knowledge in issues related to quality assurance and are prepared to respond to the issues involved in the study.

7.1. Data Collection and Analysis

The data sources for this case study consisted of interviews with key informants and institutional policy documents. Documentary analysis was used primarily to answer the research questions about formal written QA policies, while interviews sought to build understanding of the knowledge and views of key people who developed and carried out these policies. The multiple data sources allowed for triangulation of findings and conclusions about policies, practices and procedures, and problems.

Data analysis included the development of coding, conceptual categorisation, and thematic grouping (Saldana, 2009). The qualitative data analysis involved identifying closely related codes by pointing out differences and similarities, underscoring underlying and recurrent concepts, grouping related concepts, and developing conceptual constructs. Further, using the list of categories as a reference, the study identified the passages in the transcripts that represented the emerging themes for each case.

8. Results and Discussions

This section of the study is concerned with the presentation and discussion of the results of the data that were collected in order to provide answers to the research questions. The overall purpose of the study is to explore and understand the issues related to the implementation of Quality Assurance practices, importance of Quality Assurance, and challenges associated with quality assurance in Ghanaian public tertiary institutions in Distance Education, as well as find possible solutions to these challenges to be adopted by policy makers. It is hoped that the findings and suggestions from this study may help to provide other perspectives and new views to help improve quality assurance in distance education.

8.1. Research Question 1: How is Quality Assurance Practices Implemented in the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast?

In order to understand how quality assurance practice are implemented and the extent to which stakeholders maintain legitimacy with standards of quality assurance and the labour market, National Accreditation Board, and professional bodies, the study explored the nature of QA policies at the CoDE-UCC. The policies guide the college in resourcing, regulating, and maintaining its QA systems. While focusing on QA in learner support areas, data in this case study highlighted the importance of university-wide policies, particularly as articulated in QA manuals, as the foundation for QA for various institutions.

It was revealed from the policy document and the interviews that the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast has quality assurance policy adopted from the main university's quality assurance policy document. University QA manuals are important official documents because quality emphasizes establishing and meeting standards for products and services. The quality assurance document sets out standards and performance indicators, as well as important background and procedural information such as the university's profile, institutional quality statements, quality components, procedures and guidelines, and internal mechanisms for evaluating quality performance. College of Distance Education has adopted a QA systems approach, and its QA manual covers all aspects of the system, including policies and procedures, indicators and benchmarks, guidelines for self-assessment reporting, and guidelines for assessing the quality of education. The document spelt out internal and external QA dimensions and sets out Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and guidelines to achieve the standards. It clearly defines guidelines for a self-assessment report (SAR), outlining the purpose, structure, and elements to be followed by all departments across the university.

The study found that quality assurance manuals are important guides for QA implementation process in the university and College of Distance Education. The view of Belawati, Zuhairi, and Wardani (2012) that the QA policy manual explained the job descriptions and performance standards/criteria, how feedback would be provided, the appeals process, and how various incentive systems related to performance supported this finding. From the interviews, one of the respondents gave the following:

Well, we want to ensure that we are following the processes we have set ourselves. We want to ensure that the minimum quality that we expect in our operations, and when I say our operations I mean teaching, learning, research and support services that enable these activities to go on are well implemented to the latter. We provide study modules and set up teams that visits every study center to supervise the teaching and learning, and examinations. We want to achieve the minimum standard that we have set for ourselves as an institution. Because of that we move from study center to study center to check how quality of teaching and learning is going on. This forms part of our quality assurance implementation process.

In a related interview, the study sought to find out from the respondent how far the quality assurance directorate set out objectives and how the objectives have been achieved. The respondent noted that:

I will say that Quality Assurance is a process; it is not an event so as we go on, we continue improving and quality assurance only means improving so we can never say we have attained our goals. We continue trying to improve with the changing terms. So as the times are changing, people's thought are changing, we continue to improve towards what we ourselves are coming up with. So it is a process not just an event so we do not just achieve this in a short period. We continue improving upon whatever we are achieving.

The findings of the study also confirms previous studies which posit that quality has discretionary description depending on the stakeholder. Materu (2007) supported this and explains that each regulatory body of tertiary institution

defines what it considers as quality to assure itself that the institutions are conforming to such standards. Materu (2007) went further and defines Quality Assurance as "a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced. Also, quality as "fitness for purpose" meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards as defined by an institution, quality assurance bodies and appropriate academic and professional communities. This definition provided by Materu (2007) identifies the purpose of quality in higher education and the various stakeholders of quality in higher education delivery. This presupposes that quality in higher education is about conforming to both internal and external standards in which regulators of tertiary education dictates the external standards. Mishra's (2007) finding in contributing to quality assurance in higher education is in line with the results of this study when Mishra argues that quality in higher education depends on effective transmission of knowledge and skills of content, coverage and the depth of information available for reading, teaching and for problem solving which are all enhanced by the appropriate information technology.

The opinion of respondents was sought further about the functions of quality assurance units and how it supports the performance advancements. A respondent noted that:

Our functions are varied as the departments in the institutions also vary. We expect each unit of the institution to have a quality assurance unit which ensures quality in the processes of that unit. So for instance, if you take the teaching department you must have a quality assurance unit which ensures that teaching and learning are going on according to the standards that have been set. If we take a supporting unit, let say for instance, the registry, we expect that there will be a quality assurance unit there which ensures that whatever the unit has set is moving. So you will realized that each section must have a quality assurance process which should be in line with the mission and vision of the institution so that we are all working together but we must work individually and bring together all our activities to ensure that we achieve the mission and vision of the institution which is the university. So it is varied.

The research went further to find out from respondents specific roles play towards achieving quality in running academic activities thus, lecturing and provision of aids and relevant up-to-date materials for effective teaching and learning. A respondent gave the following:

Our goal is to achieve quality at the end of the day. For what we will do to achieve the best for our students is the testimony our students give about the good things we did. The first thing we do is supervision. We from the Dean's outfit and from my own outfit, once a while we pop in to see what lecturers are doing and whatever we get we use it to make decision. We actually articulate the results we get into platform where we meet lecturers to discuss some of the shortfalls or some of the observations we made.

Another respondent was quick to add to the discussion. The respondent brought to the notice of the study that there is a quality assurance handbook in which a number of functions of the quality assurance directorate performs. The respondent made reference to the quality assurance handbook and noted that:

In our quality assurance document we say the functions are to monitor and ensure quality in the university's operations, coordinate the activities on all or of all campus quality assurance offices, organise regular training sessions for campus quality assurance office, supervise the quality assurance units in the performance of quality assurance work, ensure that the use of assessment instruments for the university's operations are adhered to, monitor the review of the university's policy documents, submit report on the directorate to the quality assurance committee and develop external quality process.

A respondent added this to the discussion:

We need to improve the quality of the quality assurance programme. I tell you what we do, we go round to give seminars to equip up our staff knowledge. On a number of times I have told people that the quality assurance unit is not a policing unit, we do not police. We do not come to arrest anybody or prosecute. No, we do not do that. We go round giving seminars, advising, educating them on what they can do with the resources they have. That is what we do.

To consolidate the results of the study, the response from one of the respondents was added to the on-going discussion. The respondent noted that:

At least for this unit, we look at the academic side mostly. We do regular checks on the teaching output. That is one thing that we do always apart from that sometimes the university management may give us some add-up assignments to do. For instance, once we had to conduct a survey to find out whether students were really benefiting from distance education and sandwich programmes. For the academic side what we do is that within the semester we send out appraisal forms to both lecturers and students. The students evaluate the teaching and the course that they take. The lecturers also comment on students attitudes towards learning.

More information was sought from the respondents concerning the functions of the quality assurance units to support their enhancement performance. The respondent retorted that:

Well, for this university, some of the functions are kind of decentralized. For instance, we have the planning unit; they also do a lot of quality assurance work. Most of the time when NAB visits the university we go with the planning unit. They give us the statistics of graduates that churn out and occasionally, they also do surveys to do studies to find out if our graduates are really employed and where they find themselves. We also have other units like the Audit Unit. So our concentration is mainly on the academic and it is through this evaluation things that we do.

A respondent added this to the discussion.

Oh we have to ensure that teaching aids or teaching learning materials are provided. We have to ensure that we

have the best of teachers. Whenever some teachers those that are prepared ... you know everybody can be a teacher but it is up to you to go and prepare. We need to ensure that a set of curriculum is available, facilities in place, for example these days ICT centers.

The results of the study are in line with the findings of Yorke (1997) and Blackmore (2004). The argument of Yorke (1997) that in higher education, quality assessment, quality assurance, and quality managements have been used simultaneously, is seen in this study. He further explained that quality assessment in higher education focuses on the internal environment, which has been done already whiles quality assurance focuses on the present internal and external environments with prevention of substance as the main purpose. Blackmore (2004) in contributing to the quality assurance discourse in higher education indicated that quality assurance includes planning, auditing, verification, and recording taking preventive actions and engaging in the evaluation of the process.

Putting everything together by the various authors, it is clear that one cannot discuss quality assurance in higher education without auditing and engagement in academic review. Academic review is the self-assessment and evaluation of the teaching, learning, research, service and outcomes based on defined examination of the curricula, structure, and effectiveness of a programme as well as the quality and activities of its faculty (Materu, 2007). Audit of an institution is the review to assume whether or not accountability is being achieved.

8.2. Research Question 2: What is the Importance of Quality Assurance and Enhancement Practices Being Implemented in the College Of Distance Education?

Quality Assurance is a requirement by NAB for any tertiary institution or university in Ghana to have a functioning quality assurance unit. This brings us to appreciate the fact that with globalization, there is both internal and external quality assurance and this has been integrated in tertiary educational system in Ghana with the establishment of the National Accreditation Board which imposes on tertiary institutions to establish quality assurance units to ensure quality which is subject to peer review by other institutions and confirmation visits by the National Accreditation Board. In order to come out with the importance of quality assurance in the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast, respondents were interviewed on this issue. A respondent in an interview had this to say:

Quality for me it simply means the best part of an issue. When it comes to teaching and learning, like I said quality is the best part of an issue. When it comes to teaching and learning we expect or we are referring to the best part of one's output. Talking about the teacher or lecturer's output and that basically measured by the responses of the students through their performance. In my opinion the quality assurance unit is very useful. Because in addition to the university system quality assurance unit from time to time come in to remind us of things that we should do and they monitor. It makes meaning we really love it.

Another respondent gave the following narrative:

... Well from what I said, I cannot really tell whether there was an urgent need to establish quality assurance unit, but I think that once the university has certain goals and objectives and they want to make a kind of name for themselves, they need to have some kind of office that will be checking on some of these things and the quality assurance unit does something like that. So it is very important. I was not here from the initial point but reading some of the documents like what the NAB requires, I believe that is what made us to establish quality assurance units. They said that the quality assurance unit should be the unit that will inculcate the culture of quality within the university system and also ensure that the university's aims and objectives are being achieved.

The response above clearly indicate that the respondents viewed quality assurance as an important thing for every institution. One fact that remains is that they are all aware of quality assurance and something that is operating in all the various study centers. For instance, some perceived quality assurances as an on-going process and that changes can come as you move along and these changes are incorporated into the existing objectives of quality assurance to inform and improve practice. Others perceived quality as an institutional standard that needs to be conformed to by every individual.

Quality assurance has now become one of the central components of reform and policy instruments to be adopted by higher education institutions to the increasing expectations from both internal and external stakeholders all over the world. As Reichert (2008) puts it, quality assurance is so widespread and its vocabulary so pervasive nowadays in higher education policy and discourse that one forgets how relatively recent the enthronement of the term "quality" actually is. The quality revolution in higher education has underscored the expectation that universities must demonstrate that they are providing quality education and strives to improve it (Anderson, 2006). Bogue's (1998) view that depending on the context in which one looks at quality in higher education, quality may be measurable based on individual judgment, institutional judgment, peer judgment and labour market assessment, supported the findings of this study. This view provides relative or subjective description as to what is quality in higher education. Kapur and Crowley's (2008) findings supported this when they contended that quality in higher education is a dynamic concept which implies what is quality yesterday may not be quality today until some improvements are made. This makes quality in Higher Education a continuous process of transforming and adding value to learners and the knowledge acquired by these learners to meet specific and broader needs of the society.

8.3. Research Question 3: What are Challenges Associated with Quality Assurance in the College of Distance Education?

In Ghana, even though the public tertiary institutions have put in place their own internal quality assurance and management policies, quality assurance is seen as a demand by the National Accreditation Board. As a result, all public tertiary institutions have established quality assurance units with some upgrading the unit to the status of a directorate. These directorates generally suffer little or no budgetary allocations, inadequate staff, and no training of quality assurance

personnel just to mention but a few. These challenges would have to be addressed by both tertiary institutions themselves and the government in meeting the needs and demands of quality assurance experts. The study sought the opinion of respondents about the challenges the face in the process of quality assurance in the distance education. The following represent the narratives from the respondents:

We are not well equip in terms of financial resources and human resource. The quality assurance unit has not got enough qualified trained staff. That is one of our major challenges. As we are talking now we are trying to go online with our assessment forms so that we will not continue taking round papers so that we have to work to a very great extent. We are trying to set up a server hopefully by next semester we should be able. I want us to bring a lot of innovation into the college and various department and study centers, but it is not easy.

Another person was interviewed as to whether there were certain challenges faced by the College of Distance Education in the discharge of Quality Assurance and management strategies. This was the response.

Hmm! Sometimes it is very difficult when we talk about some of these issues as if we do not know what is happening in the country. How can we say there are no challenges when we all know that there is no enough finance and budget to carry out monitoring, supervision and evaluation of quality assurance programmes. Some of the mechanisms put in place are not effective. So we need to improve upon our budgetary, monitoring and supervision of programmes. After implementing the programmes that should not be the end we need to supervise.

More information was solicited from the respondents concerning the challenges distance education do face in ensuring quality operations in their various departments and institutions. A respondent retorted:

A lot a lot a lot ... you know, one may enjoy the cooperation of the lecturers this time at another time you know the person is researching for his promotion and that sort of thing so he will not even have time for you. Hmm extra meetings or what do we call it, meetings and all those things. And again, the workload does not even permit us to attend workshops and other things that will enrich our knowledge. These are some of the challenges besides the number of students to handle.

Another respondent was quick to add this to the discussion.

Look for example, I am teaching a class of about 400 and for sometimes now and just after this programme the scripts are here. Just after they have gone home the sandwich batch is also coming and so you will realise that it leaves so much stress on the lecturers in the first place so he does not even have time to go for things that will actually benefit him as a lecturer. So the number of students and workload and sometimes the materials are not forthcoming as we want them. Hmmm yea the lecturers we have some challenges talking about offices. Sometimes you will get three lecturers in one offices sometimes four. The university has tried to provide some.

Relating the results to the literature, it confirms the work of Standa (2008) which concluded that one of the most difficult challenges that leaders within universities face is that they must take responsibility for systems that provide assurance of quality teaching, research and community services within rapidly changing environments, despite bureaucratic structural context dominated by process mentality. Also, the literature revealed that unplanned explosion in student enrolment from proliferation and duplication of academic programmes, departments and faculties, was not supported by increased funding leading to shortages and poor maintenance typified by dilapidated academic infrastructure, obsolete equipment as well as inadequacy of other teaching and learning facilities are indeed challenges facing quality assurance in the universities. The universities have continued to witness shortage of academic staff as a result of the rapid increase in academic programmes as well as poor work conditions leading to loss of staff to other sectors in the country and to other nations.

9. Conclusions

From the results, it was concluded that there were clear quality assurance policies adopted and implemented in the College of Distance Education, University of Cape Coast. The College of Distance Education had quality assurance manual which is used by stakeholders in curriculum design and revision. It was also realized that quality assurance programmes are in place for monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance programmes. Some of the challenges were that there were no adequate budgetary allocation, inadequate staff, and lack of periodic training for staff. The study concluded that though, the College of Distance Education had an internal quality assurance policy, but there were no adequate qualified staff in place for monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance programmes.

The study therefore, suggested that the College of Distance Education should recruit more qualified quality assurance staff in each of the zones and various regional centers. The number of staff in the quality assurance unit of the College should be increased to solve the problem of inadequacy of staff. There should be periodic on-the-job and in-service training programmes for the staff upgrade themselves and also to equip them with new ideas in technology to enable them handle issues in the changing pattern of quality assurance.

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