QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES IN GHANAIAN POLYTECHNICS: THE CASE OF KOFORIDUA POLYTECHNIC

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ABSTRACT
To consistently and efficiently assure quality standards in Higher Education (HE), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have put in place internal mechanisms and policies. Quality Assurance Agencies have also been set up by many countries to coordinate the proper development of HEIs. This study sought to examine the quality assurance practices of Koforidua Polytechnic (KP). The study was a descriptive qualitative research. Using the student life cycle framework the author followed students from admission stage through being taught and assessed and to graduation, looking at the quality checks at each stage. The findings suggest that KP has taken steps to assure quality in its operations. Despite these efforts, KP has not been successful in establishing a quality culture and challenges remain. Among others the author recommends that the quality assurance agencies should support Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) including KP to develop internal quality culture.

Keywords: Quality, Quality Assurance, Quality Assurance Practices, Higher Education, Koforidua Polytechnic

1.0 Introduction
Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have over the years played pivotal roles in the socio-economic development of nations. In order to guarantee the sensitivity of HE to national situations and offer value-for-money education, there is the need to consistently and efficiently assure high standards in the provisions of the institutions that deliver HE (Anon, 2008). To achieve this, a number of HEIs have put in place internal mechanisms and policies to ensure quality standards. Quality assurance agencies have been set up by various countries to coordinate the proper development of such institutions.

1.1 Statement of the problem
In Ghana, apart from standards put in place by the quality assurance bodies to ensure quality HE, each institution has its own internal policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own purposes. In spite of the policies and mechanisms put in place by Koforidua Polytechnic(KP) to ensure quality in its operations, quality culture is not embedded and challenges remain

1.2 Purpose of the study
The main purpose of this study is to examine the internal quality assurance practices of KP. The study focuses on significant portions of the Student Lifecycle framework(Chambers &Paull, 2008). Students are followed from admissions stage through being taught and assessed and to graduation, looking at the quality checks at each stage. In the literature it appears there is no empirical research on quality assurance practices in polytechnics in Ghana, particularly Koforidua polytechnic and the contribution of this paper is to fill this knowledge gap.
1.3 Research questions

The research questions to be addressed in this study are:

1. What is the quality assurance model for HE in Ghana?
2. What are the internal quality assurance practices of KP?
3. What quality assurance challenges do the polytechnic face?
4. What is the way forward for the polytechnic?
5. 

1.4 Quality and Quality Assurance

The term quality migrated or was imported from its more familiar industrial and commercial settings of the 1980s into the domain of HE and also to other professional and public service settings (Newton, 2002). Defining quality in HE is a challenging task since quality is a rather vague and controversial concept. In the literature there is no single definition of the term which is absolutely agreed or universally accepted. Tammaro (2005) observed that quality is a value judgement, differently interpreted by different stakeholders, such as governments, employers, students, administrators, lecturers, etc. Like ‘beauty’ quality is subjective, a matter of personal judgement (Doherty, 2008). Although it is difficult to define quality especially in HE, Mishra (2007) argued that the term has a few central ideas around which the whole concept revolves: quality as absolute (is given and considered as the highest possible standards), quality as relative (is described in relative terms), quality as a process (is the outcome of systems and procedural requirements), and quality as culture (recognises the importance of organisational view of quality as a process of transformation, where each entity is concerned and acknowledges the importance of quality). He noted that educational institutions are particularly concerned with quality as a culture, though other ideas of quality have their respective places.

Harvey (1997) identified five broad approaches to quality identifiable in relation to HE. These are quality as exceptional, quality as perfection, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformation. Most of these definitions however do not seem to apply to HE. For example the dimension of quality as perfection cannot be applicable since HE does not aim to produce defect-free graduates (Watty, 2003).

From the above discussions, there is no single definition of the term ‘quality’ which is universally accepted in HE. For the purpose of this study, I will also consider ‘quality’ as “fitness for purpose”; that is, establishing the status of quality assurance in KP in order to ascertain KP’s conformity to generally accepted standards as defined by the institution and quality assurance bodies.

Many definitions of quality assurance are identified in the literature but generally refer to 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 (CHEA, 2003). Quality assurance has become globally important especially in HE and more attention is being paid to it than ever before. According to Tagoe (2008) the purposes of quality assurance and accreditation in HE are to ensure good quality education is being offered, to equip students to manage their own learning and development throughout their lives, to provide students with knowledge and skills that are relevant to the current job market locally, nationally and internationally, and to ensure that internationally recognized academic standards are achieved.

1.5 Quality Assurance Models

From the literature there seems to be three prominent approaches of quality assurance in HEIs. These are the Command and Control Model, the Self-regulation Model, and the Market Regulation Model. Jamieson (2010) observed that the Command and Control Model is an attempt by the state to control HEIs. In this case the state has prescriptive rules and/or standards to ensure quality in HE. HEIs are sanctioned for failure to observe these rules and/or standards. An example of this model is how US state universities are regulated. In the Self-regulation Model, HEIs are autonomous. They design their own curricula and award their own degrees. HEIs are ruled by professionals and it is trusted that these professionals will do the right things. In the Market Regulation Model there is a relationship between market competition and HEIs. Market competition for HE causes consumers (students) to make informed choices. The best HEIs flourish and the worst fails. Jamieson’s (2010) observation is in line with
Clark’s (1983) classic triangle of coordination which suggests three principal modes for coordinating or controlling behaviour in academic institutions: state regulation, professional self-regulation which was termed “the academic oligarchy” and market forces. Clark’s (1983) model is used to determine how HEIs are steered and how influential each force is in relation to the steering of these systems. Michael (2001) agreed with Clark when he observed that the state, the academe, and the market are the primary forces influencing quality in HE. A view supported by Becket & Brookes (2008).

2.0 Methodology
The research design is tailored to the purpose of the study which is to examine the quality assurance practices of KP. The study is a descriptive qualitative research. There are many different approaches to the qualitative research method and this study uses the approach of case studies, a focus on one or a few examples of a social phenomenon (Babbie, 2004 p.293). Case studies make it possible to give a certain level of overview and make the differences between HEIs visible.

Document content analysis, semi-structured interviews and direct observations were employed to collect data for the study. Documents that were analysed include the National Board for Professional and Technician Examinations (NABPTEX) Act (Act 492) of 1994, the National Accreditation Board (NAB) Act (Act 744) of 2007, the NABPTEX Student Guide for HND Examinations, administrative documents of KP among others. According to Babbie (2004 p. 263) an interview is a data collection method that consists of an encounter where one person (interviewer) questions another person (the respondent). In this study, semi-structured interviews were held in order to ascertain the acceptable standards of Ghana’s HE system and the quality assurance practices of KP.

Purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample size which comprises the Heads of the Quality Assurance Unit, the Examination Department, and the Admissions Department, all of KP. An official each of the quality assurance bodies (NAB and NABPTEX) were also interviewed. The questions revolved around the research questions. Purposive sampling instead of other sampling techniques was employed because the author believed, based on prior information, that the selected personnel were people who could provide the data needed for the study. The major disadvantage of this approach is that the author’s judgement may be in error; may not be correct in estimating the representativeness of the sample or their expertise regarding the information needed.

The author, having worked at KP for more than ten years and participated in quality assurance issues, also used his personal experience and direct observation to gather data for the study.

The study has some limitations. Firstly, the author is a former Vice Rector of the polytechnic and therefore the responses of the interviewees in the polytechnic may be influenced by their acquaintance with him. Secondly, in choosing the author’s own organisation as a case study, there is the possibility of personal biases and values which can potentially impact on the research questions and process. The author however, remained objective.

The analysis is guided by the student lifecycle framework of Chambers and Paull (2008) (see figure 1). The framework follows students in HEIs from the pre-application stage to the marketing stage. The framework has not been utilized as a whole; this will be beyond the space and time constraints of the study. The adapted framework focuses on significant portions of the lifecycle, i.e., Student Admissions, Teaching and Learning Processes, Graduation and Employment, looking at the quality checks at each stage and relating them to the accepted standards of the quality assurance bodies.

3.0 Results
3.1 Ghana’s Quality Assurance Model for HE
It was found out that Ghana employs a multiplicity of quality assurance models, which is the Command and Control Model, the Professional Self-Regulatory Model and the Market Model (Clark, 1983) but the Command and Control Model seems to play a more influential role. HEIs in Ghana are regulated by a number of regulatory bodies to ensure quality. These include the National Board for Professional and Technician Examinations (NABPTEX), the National
Accreditation Board (NAB), the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) and the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (COTVET).

NABPTEX formulates and administer schemes of examinations for non-university tertiary institutions, both public and private, accredited by NAB. NABPTEX responsibilities include: 1) setting standards for assessment of skill competencies in non-university tertiary institutions, professional bodies and private tertiary institutions; 2) moderating examination questions for all HND programmes in Polytechnics in Ghana and other non-university tertiary institutions; and 3) conducting examinations and awarding national certificates and diplomas based on the results of the examination (NABPTEX Act, Act 492, 1994).

The responsibilities of NAB include: 1) accrediting both public and private tertiary institutions as regards the contents and standards of their programmes; 2) determining the programmes and requirements for the proper operation of an institution and the maintenance of acceptable levels of academic or professional standards in the institution in consultation with that institution; and 3) determining the equivalences of diplomas, certificates and other qualifications awarded by institutions in the country or elsewhere (NAB Act, Act 744, 2007). NAB ensures quality polytechnic education by granting accreditation to the polytechnics to operate. The methodology the NAB uses is the ‘threshold’ model which seeks to identify the inputs (or threshold standards) required before offering accreditation to programmes/institutions.

The NCTE serves as the coordinator of tertiary institutions in terms of budget, finance and salary negotiation, development of norms and standards to ensure transparency and accountability to the state. Its primary objective is to advice the Minister of Education on all matters relating to tertiary education (NCTE Act, Act454, 1993)

The COTVET is in charge of technical and vocational training and education (TVET) in the country (COTVET Act, 2006). The mandate of COTVET is to promote TVET and coordinate with the polytechnics such that products of COTVET institutions get access to polytechnic education to ensure continuous practical training.

3.2 Internal Quality Assurance Practices of KP

3.2.1 Student admissions

The Polytechnic has an admission brochure that contains the programmes of study and the admissions requirements for each programme. The admissions requirements conform to the standards set by NAB. The Polytechnic has an Admissions Committee made up of members of the various faculties and is a sub-committee of the Academic Board. The Committee’s main function is to ensure that only students who meet minimum requirements of the various programmes are admitted into the Polytechnic. The Committee meets regularly especially during the admissions period to select qualified applicants. The Admission Department organises entrance examinations to screen mature applicants before they are admitted into the Polytechnic. To ensure that only qualified students are admitted into the polytechnic, the Quality Assurance Unit collaborates with the Internal Audit Department to conduct Post Admission Audits. According to the Heads of the Quality Assurance Unit and the Admissions Department, the post admission audits has helped to improve quality in the admission process by ensuring that only qualified applicants are admitted.

3.2.2 Teaching and Learning Processes

Adequate facilities/equipments are necessary for effective teaching and learning. Unfortunately, it was observed that the KP does not have adequate classrooms, library, laboratories, internet and audio-visual technology for teaching and learning as required by NAB. According to the Head of the Quality Assurance Unit, her outfit monitors and brings to the attention of management some of these lapses so that appropriate actions could be taken. The Unit makes sure that the available resources are efficiently utilised. It was observed that in some departments, for example in the Accountancy Department, total student load per week is between 20-25 contact hours, far above the NAB standard which is between 15 and 21 contact hours for full time students. The polytechnic has put in place appointments and promotions policies that ensure that only applicants that meet the necessary requirements are employed or promoted. Newly recruited staff goes through formal interview before they are appointed or promoted. For lectureship it is required that only applicants with Masters Degree and with adequate research training are employed. Recruited lecturers serve six months probation before they are confirmed.
To ensure quality teaching, students assess lecturers at the end of every semester. The assessment is based on items such as the provision of course outlines with references, adequate coverage of course content, the use of appropriate teaching methods, and lecturer appearance, among others. This exercise is used to select the best teacher of the year.

The polytechnic employs a self-assessment system to assure quality. It has instituted Academic Review Committees (Programme Advisory Committees) for all programmes. The review committees are made up of external experts from academia and industry who visit the Polytechnic once every year. For each programme, a review committee conducts an appraisal to ascertain the level of achievement of its internally set objectives and standards. This is distinct from the required pre-accreditation self-assessment exercise which is externally mandated by NAB. This self-assessment exercise covers areas such as facilities and equipment, teaching and non-teaching staff, student and staff relationship, curriculum content, teaching methodologies, and conduct of examinations, among others. Recommendations of the Advisory Committees are submitted to the management of the polytechnic for actions to be taken on them.

For KP to meet its own quality standards and the standards of NAB and NABPTEX, it has a published Examination Guide, which together with the NABPTEX Examination Guide regulates examination activities in the polytechnic. These are available to all students. The polytechnic employs the external examination system. Examination questions are submitted to NABPTEX for moderation by external examiners, which is to ensure that questions meet required standards. As pointed out by the HOD for examinations, invigilators, supervisors, examination officers, and security personnel are given orientation on the roles expected of them during the conduct of examinations; this is done every semester. She indicated that before and during examination, rules and regulations governing examinations are circulated for the information of students. Examination cards are used to regulate the sitting arrangements of students to prevent any form of examination malpractice. Students’ cards are inspected during the examination to prevent impersonation. Also, strict invigilation is done to prevent any form of examination malpractice. An Examination Malpractice Committee, a sub-committee of the Academic Board, sits at the end of each semester and students caught engaged in any form of examination malpractice are sanctioned to serve as a deterrent to others. This ranges from cancellation of papers to rustication for a stated period. KP has instituted an Examination Results Audit Committee whose objective is to vet marked examination scripts in all subject areas to ensure that they have been correctly marked and recorded. Marked scripts of final year students including dissertations are also vetted by external moderators appointed by NABPTEX. Students who satisfy all general requirements of NABPTEX and the polytechnic are awarded certificates after completion of their studies. According to the official of NABPTEX, notwithstanding previous conferment of award, NABPTEX in consultation with the Polytechnic may at any time, cancel an award with retrospective effect if it becomes known that a candidate had gained admission with false qualification; had impersonated someone else; or had been guilty of examination malpractice.

3.2.3 Graduation and employment

Like any higher education institution, KP has the responsibility to keep track of the performance of its graduates to ascertain their employability and also find out whether the polytechnic’s programmes have impacted positively on the individual, their place of work, and the country. There is also the need to find out from employers the performance of the polytechnic’s graduates on the labour market. According to the official from NAB, this is a requirement of the Board. The study however, found out that the polytechnic has not formally carried out any tracer study to determine the performance of its graduates on the job market and the influence of its programmes in meeting the human resource needs of the society. Thus there are no quality checks on graduate performance and employment.

4.0 Discussion

KP has taken innovative initiatives to improve upon internal quality, notably the establishment of the Quality Assurance Unit, the Admissions Committee, the Post Admissions Audit, the Academic Review Committee (Programme Advisory Committee) and the Examination Results Audit Committee. However, KP is faced with the following quality assurance challenges:

1. Enrolment at KP is not matching with the infrastructure (library, classroom space, laboratories etc.), faculty strength and resources, administration and management systems. This has gradually degraded the quality of
teaching, learning and research functions of the polytechnic. It has manifested in unacceptable student-lecturer ratio particularly in the Business School at KP which is about 52:1, far above the NAB quality standard of 18:1.

2. It was observed that some lecturers were having excessive teaching loads. They were teaching more than twenty (20) hours per week, far above the NAB standard of 9-12 contact hours per week, leaving little room for research.

3. Quality teaching and learning largely depend on the availability of highly qualified faculty members. However it was revealed that some faculty members of the polytechnic do not have the minimum qualification required for appointment. Some of them do not have adequate research and industrial training before engagement as required by the NAB.

4. Some Heads of Department (HODs) were found to be too young and inexperienced to handle the enormous demands of managing the issues and problems of leadership. The NAB requires that HODs should be senior lecturers but investigation revealed that none of the HODs in the polytechnic is a senior lecturer.

5. The NAB requires that syllabuses and general curriculum be adequate and appropriate and be reviewed at least every five years. Unfortunately, the polytechnic has no policy on curriculum review and for the past seven (7) years it has not reviewed the curriculum of some courses. This puts into question the relevance and quality of the courses offered.

6. The polytechnic does not have a comprehensive staff development plan to replace staff, upgrade staff and improve competence of staff as required by the NAB. There is also no proper succession plan with regards to academic leadership.

6. Although the activities of the Programme Advisory Committees have led to some quality improvements in the various programmes of study, data highlighted that the polytechnic does not implement most of the recommendations of the Committees.

7. It was revealed that quality assurance has not been fully embraced by some staff members, who view the Quality Assurance Unit with suspicion. They perceive quality assurance as fault finding and therefore unwilling to accept the unit. Some see its role as interference and a ‘policeman’.

8. There are long delays in the release of examination results. Students sometimes get the results of the first semester examination just before the start of the second semester examination. The situation is due to late submission of examination marks by lecturers and the bureaucratic procedures involved before results are released.

9. NABPTEX is not able to cope with the large student numbers and has resorted to verifying scripts of only final year students. This has a negative effect on quality.

10. In the Planning Department where the Quality Assurance Unit is located, it was observed that there are only seven personnel. Apart from the HOD who holds a Masters degree, the rest hold Bachelor degrees or Higher National Diploma (HND) and have little experience on quality assurance issues. The Unit is also not adequately resourced and the personnel are not well motivated. This situation affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the Unit.

5.0 Conclusion

Ghana employs a multiplicity of quality assurance models but the Command and Control Model seems to be more influential. There are structures in place to address quality in HE primarily through NAB and NABPTEX. These two bodies have standard requirements that they expect HEIs to meet. The methodology the NAB uses is the ‘threshold’ model which seeks to identify the inputs (or threshold standards) required before offering accreditation to programmes/institutions. The quality assurance practices of KP are geared towards meeting the standards set by the quality assurance bodies and also to fulfil its own mission. Despite these efforts KP has not been fully successful in
establishing a quality culture; challenges remain. Hence the author suggests a study on developing a framework for embedding quality culture in KP.

6.0 Recommendations

1. The external quality assurance bodies, i.e. NAB and NABPTEX should support HEIs including KP to develop internal quality culture. The NAB should move from the threshold standard model (which serves to identify under resourcing) to a more performance improvement model. The NAB can assist by ensuring that institutional processes of quality assurance in KP are strengthened. It should be possible for NAB and NABPTEX to combine being a ‘policeman’ i.e. making sure institutions follow the quality standards and that of supporting HEIs to improve quality.

2. The polytechnic should have a Strategic Plan for quality assurance, support it for execution and assess all major activities against quality standards. This will gradually transform KP culture into quality culture which will further transform into quality education, quality curriculum, quality human resources, quality graduates, quality research and quality infrastructure (Wahab, p.304).

3. There should be a balance between a centrally located quality assurance unit and what goes on in the departments. Quality assurance desks could be set up in the various departments to run the system and to report to the head of the Quality Assurance Unit.

4. As part of KP’s strategic plan, an appropriate balance must be maintained between student numbers, and physical infrastructure and faculty capacity. This will address problems associated with the student/lecturer ratio and excess teaching load. Lecturers will also have more time for research, a very important function of HEIs.

5. Moreover, the Polytechnic’s policy that a Masters degree is required for appointment to a lectureship should be strictly enforced. Any faculty member appointed without a Masters degree should be made to enrol on a Masters Degree programme within three years of appointment. Failure to complete the degree should result in termination of employment.

6. A comprehensive staff development plan should be developed by KP as part of the polytechnic strategic plan to replace staff, upgrade staff and improve competence of staff. Top management should be committed to the plan.

7. Since the salaries and conditions of service of polytechnic staff are generally poor, KP should be more entrepreneurial by identifying other sources that will generate internal income to supplement what staff receive from government.

8. On the issue of succession planning, all faculty members should be involved in committee work at the departmental and polytechnic levels, to identify those with leadership potential. Such potential could be enhanced through participation in leadership development workshops and other formal programmes.

9. KP should be committed to the activities of the Programme Advisory Committees by implementing their recommendations. This is necessary so that their activities will not become mere academic exercises.

10. The polytechnic must come out with a policy on curriculum review. For instance the curriculum could be reviewed every five years. This should be done in collaboration with industry and NABPTREX to make courses relevant and up-to-date.

11. For quality examination, KP should put in place measures that will ensure that lecturers and departments meet the deadlines of NABPTEX. These should be strictly enforced.

12. The polytechnic should be committed to severely punishing candidates who involve themselves in examination malpractices to serve as deterrent to others.

13. The Quality Assurance Unit of KP should be given adequate resources to work with. The competences of the staff should be upgraded through regular training and workshops to reflect contemporary issues in quality assurance.
References


COTVET Act, 2006


NCTE Act, Act 454 of 1993


Annexure

Figure 1: Student Lifecycle Model

1. Pre-application
2. Application (Admission)
3. Pre-registration
4. Registration
5. Induction
6. Teaching and Learning processes
7. Pastoral Care
8. Employability and Career Services
9. Graduation
10. Alumni
11. Marketing