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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring the Internal Quality Assurance Management Practices at the University of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

There is a dearth in literature on how quality assurance actors perceive the effectiveness of their own approaches to internal quality assurance practices in Ghana's tertiary education system. This study, with the systems model as an analytical construct, used a constructivist-interpretivist approach to explore the internal quality assurance management practices at the University of Ghana. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to gather data from the University of Ghana (UG). The themes that emerged from the data indicated that UG has a comprehensive quality assurance policy, policy implementation structure and quality assurance management system. The results show that there is lack of well–resourced quality assurance offices at the policy implementation staircases, inadequate quality assurance stakeholders' involvement and neglect of quality assurance measures for educational outcome sub-system. The results imply that for UG to improve its internal quality assurance management, there is a need to establish well-resourced quality assurance offices at the policy implementation staircases. In addition, quality assurance actors should involve all stakeholders stipulated in the quality assurance policy documents.

Keywords: Quality assurance, university, management, higher education, Ghana

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INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance (QA) researchers contend that quality of teaching and learning has become a major strategic issue in higher education systems across the globe over the past decades (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Enders & Westerheijden, 2014). The quality of university education has become an ever-growing concern since the 1980s and 1990s when high global demand for quality university education started. Some challenges faced by public universities since then have been public demand for accountability at time of high student to staff ratio and reduction in government funding that has led to deterioration of educational facilities especially in developing countries including Ghana (IIEP, 2010; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Ewell, 2010; Taylor, 2010). Most significantly, under the new public management paradigm, continuous quality improvement, comparison of quality of educational outcomes, rankings, and a higher degree of university autonomy and accountability have become a fundamental part of higher education administrators' day-to-day work (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013).

In Ghana, public universities started experiencing worsening relationship with the military government that ruled in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This resulted in cut-downs in financial support to the universities coupled with physical infrastructure challenges and these have resulted in deterioration conditions in the public universities (Ajayi et al., 1996). To improve on quality of core functions of teaching, learning, research and community service, the University of Ghana (UG) established Academic Quality Assurance Unit (AQAU) in 2005 to coordinate quality assurance activities within the University. AQAU has been in existence for about sixteen years and there is a need to conduct a study on how quality assurance actors perceive the effectiveness of their own approaches to internal quality assurance practices. The objective of this paper was to explore internal quality assurance management practices of UG's internal quality assurance actors.

Quality

Although the concept of quality in higher education is widely discussed by its stakeholders, many stakeholders in the educational sector such as students, staff (teaching and non-teaching staff) administrators, sponsors, employers, accreditation bodies, government, view and interpret quality differently based on their needs and perception (Singh & Single, 2018). For example, students may focus on the facilities provided and the perceived usefulness of their education for future employment; teachers, on the other hand, may pay attention to the teaching-learning process; university management may give importance to the institution's achievements; parents may consider the achievements of their children; and employers may consider the competence of the institution's graduates. Given that, each stakeholder has a different approach to defining quality; it is not possible, therefore, to talk about quality as a single clear-cut concept. Any definition of quality must be understood in terms of the context in which it is used. Badran et al. (2019) list five different approaches to quality in the field of higher education and says it can be viewed:

1. In terms of the exceptional (highest standards);
2. In terms of conformity to standards;
3. As fitness for purpose;
4. As effectiveness in achieving institutional goals; and
5. As meeting customers' stated or implied needs.

Quality assurance (QA)

There is a universal agreement among QA researchers about difficulty in adopting a common definition for QA in tertiary education, however, general definitions of QA can be found in the literature (Martin & Stella, 2007). QA is for instance defined as "those mechanisms and procedures designed to reassure the various stakeholders in higher education that institutions accord a high priority to implementing policies designed to maintain and enhance institutional effectiveness" (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 178). According to Tsevi (2014) and Boateng (2014), QA is concerned with a planned, systematic, and sustained review of the procedures and processes of an establishment or institution to ascertain whether the established or laid down standards of teaching, assessment, research, innovation, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met or otherwise.

Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) Management: The Systems Model

Systems model as educational quality management approach allows for assessment of educational inputs, processes and outputs aspects of the educational institution and interrelate the effects of one aspect to put the available resources into best use towards the purpose for which the institution was established (Gupta & Gupta 2013). They noted that university is a complex system which receives influences from both external and internal environmental sub-systems. Therefore, systems theory is best for university quality management as the theory emphasizes all-inclusive approach towards attainment of educational quality goals and gives opportunity to obtain feedback through the output sub-system, which are used to re-energize the entire system through the input sub-system.

Educational Inputs Sub-System

The higher education environment provides personnel, financing, theory, and knowledge. The national and local governments enact laws that regulate the university. In addition, other groups may make demands on the university. Students, for example, want relevant curriculum that will prepare them for employment. Faculty might want higher salary, better working conditions, and fringe benefits. Similarly, the community expects the university to provide quality education. In this situation where each group has its demands, it is the job of the university administrators to integrate these diverse goals into a viable plan of action. The educational input sub-system component of the model comprises all educational resources and leadership needed to be used in the educational processes of university's core activities of programme and course planning and reviews, teaching and research activities and assessment practices (Von Bertalanffy, 1973; Weihrich, 2008). The input sub-system leads to the process sub-system. The quality of the input determines the quality of the process (Eggins, 2014).

Educational Process Sub-System

The process or throughput sub-system includes the internal operation of the university and its system of operational management. The university administrators must utilize their technical competence in communication, decision-making, curriculum development, motivation, developing organizational culture and their leadership styles in transforming the inputs into outputs. The educational process part refers to activities such as programme and course development and reviews, teaching and learning, research activities and assessment practices engaged in by quality actors and stakeholders of the educational system to achieve institutional goals (von Bertalanffy, 1973; Weihrich, 2008). The process sub-system leads to the output sub-system. In addition, the quality of the process sub-system determines the quality of the output sub-system which is the graduates and research outputs.

Educational Output Sub-System

Outputs sub-system include student achievement, growth, dropout, attitude toward faculty, faculty performance, employee job satisfaction, employee-management relations, and university-community relations, among others. This aspect of the system deals with systematic collection of relevant information on the extent to which the educational process sub-system met the expected educational goals and which aspects of the process requires improvement. The educational output sub-system generates feedback that could be used as new input to close quality feedback loop with the stakeholders in the process sub-system (von Bertalanffy, 1973; Weihrich, 2008).

Educational Outcome: Graduate Employability Focus of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA)

Educational outcome feedback information is usually obtained from outcome of the educational systems such as students, graduates, and users of graduates' services in the job market (Von Bertalanffy, 1973; Weihrich, 2008). For instance, Martin (2018) maintained that IQA and graduate employability deals with graduates' skills set and how they are useful in the job market, community and to graduate themselves. This means IQA and graduate employability can be seen from educational outcome perspective. In support of Martin (2018)'s argument, Westerheijden et al. (2013) and Dunn et al. (2016); indicated that one side of the employability focus of IQA is the quality assuring of all educational processes that students are subjected to acquire a desirable skills and knowledge that is useful to the graduates in all circumstances. The other side deals with graduates having employment opportunities and using acquired knowledge and skills to provide services required by the employers in the job market (Dunn et al., 2016). Feedback can be obtained from employers and alumni through surveys such as tracer studies and alumni survey.

The External Environment: Closing the Quality Feedback Loop

The external environment or the supra-system reacts to these outputs and provides feedback to the university system. The feedback loop goes back to both the process and the inputs. If the feedback is positive, then the university's stability can be maintained. If negative, it can be used to correct deficiencies in administrator's operational plan of action, which in turn will influence the university's output. As universities are regarded as a system that receive input from the environmental sub-system, it is important to put measures in place to check whether university programmes are producing acceptable outcomes suitable for use in the environment and this is normally achieved by using data generated through the feedback system to improve on the educational activities that can bring out the acceptable outcome (Musai, 2017). Regarding IQA, studies carried by Mulliner and Tucker (2015) identified two types of closing the feedback loop and these are engaging students and engaging lecturers by communication of the feedback of evaluation and expected follow-up activities.

Factors that Support Internal Quality Assurance Management

Quality assurance researchers indicated that both internal and external factors drive implementation of IQA policy in public universities. The external factors include national QA policy, national quality assurance agenda and national laws guiding university administration (Eggins, 2014). About internal factors, level of decentralization, autonomy, financial incentives, quality educational resources such as human, material resources and infrastructural facility, active engagement of all key stakeholders and effective IQA information system. Others include comprehensive IQA policy to ensure rigor of the IQA system, effective IQA decisions and well-resourced

management support structures. In addition, decentralized organizational structure, quality culture, committed leadership, effective feedback management communication system that closes the feedback loop with stakeholders (Sampaio & Rosa, 2012; Eggins, 2014; Ganseuer, & Pistor, 2017). The role of educational leadership in promoting IQA efforts includes QA vision statement and promoting it through employee motivation, developing strategic IQA policy in line with external QA agencies' requirements,' putting in place strategic resources and empowerment of decentralized unit leaders (van Ameijde et al., 2009). Encouraging full ownership of IQA systems and practices among IQA actors and stakeholders make them to be committed to all aspects of the IQA processes leading to QA culture. The benefits of developing QA culture are that the commitments of stakeholders and QA actors help to meet deadlines and exceed targets throughout all the IQA implementation levels as well as give power and urgency to IQA actors at the decentralized levels (Sursock, 2011).

METHOD

Research Design

The researchers intended to explore perceptions of quality actors on internal quality assurance management practices. The study was based on social constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. From the social constructivist-interpretivist assumptions of this study, a qualitative approach was deemed suitable. Hence, the research approach adopted was qualitative. The design was case study because this research explored current social experiences in a real-life setting (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Setting and Participants

The setting of the study was the University of Ghana. The population for the study consisted of quality assurance actors at the University of Ghana. A purposive sampling was used in selecting twelve quality assurance actors as interview participants from the University of Ghana. Purposive sampling was used in selecting interview participants made up of two (2) senior members from the Academic Quality Assurance Unit (AQAU) and ten (10) Heads of Departments selected from the Colleges of Health Sciences, Basic and Applied Sciences, Humanities and Education. The reason for selecting the Heads of Departments and AQAU senior members for this study was because the core functions of teaching, learning and research are carried out at the academic departments whereas quality assurance policy formulation and coordination are carried out by the AQAU. Furthermore, apart from their willingness to participate in the study, by virtue of their positions, the researchers were sure of obtaining valuable IQA information on UG from their offices. Furthermore, the researcher believed that since the selected UG's QA actors were directly involved in IQA policy formulation and implementation, they could provide rich information for the study.

Instruments

The interview guide contained guided questions on functions of the quality assurance unit, quality assurance mechanism, the scope of quality assurance activities, quality assurance structures, involvement of key stakeholders and factors that promote/hinder quality assurance practices. The document analysis guide used was divided into the following sections: Introduction, types of documents to collect for review, document collection and selection, document evaluation, document content analysis, document context analysis, document interpretation, document citation and referencing and ethical considerations. The main document reviewed was the UG' quality assurance policy. The case study design was selected for this study because the researcher was interested in

exploring an ongoing lived experience of key IQA actors, therefore, there was the need to interact with the quality assurance actors at their places of work in order to get a deeper meaning of how they practise internal quality assurance (Yin, 2009). In addition, the study was designed to explore an ongoing condition of IQA at UG as an exemplary case, believed to be a rich case institution with a well-established functional QA unit.

Qualitative research approach was used in data collection and analysis. To ensure reliability of the interview protocol, the instrument was piloted and issues of ambiguity was addressed before the main interviews. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews triangulated with document analysis were the main data collection methods.

Procedure

The twelve (12) participants were interviewed in the university setting after the piloting of the instrument within a duration of 40 days. Notes were taken and memos were created simultaneously with the interviews. Most of the interviews, which were audio recorded subject to the permission of the participants, lasted for 50 minutes. The recorded interview data was transcribed and used for analyses.

Data Analysis

Content and thematic techniques were used in data analysis and interpretation of findings. Specifically, thematic analysis enabled researchers to investigate a broad range of questions and extracted rich and complex results from the data. It also enabled the researchers to undertake a more in-depth investigation of the subject matter of the research and helped reveal hidden complexities that other methods of analysis may overlook. Thematic analysis also allowed the researchers to interact with data and think about their own biases, assumptions, and interpretations. The use of content analysis enabled the researchers to analyse the qualitative data in a systematic and objective way. It offered the researchers a dependable and reproducible way to analyse the content of document which helped to reduce the risk of bias or subjective interpretation. It further allowed the researchers to concentrate on the content of the data and valuable information was extracted. By classifying and coding your content, the researchers were able to discover patterns, trends, that were present in the data and provided valuable insights into the research topic. The emerging themes from the data were used to construct a contextual quality assurance management model (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Akşan & Baki, 2017). The researchers in this study ensured that the findings were credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable by applying varies techniques of enhancing rigor and trustworthiness of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2018). The following paragraphs elaborate how the rigor and trustworthiness of the study was ensured.

To ensure trustworthiness of the research process and to attain the rigor required in ensuring credibility of this study, the researcher followed the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability criteria suggested by qualitative researchers such as (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Krefting, 1991 & Baxter & Jack, 2008) as follows:

Credibility: In order to ensure credibility of the data used for this study, member checking was undertaken whereby transcribed scripts were sent to all the interview participants which were confirmed as the true recording of the interviews. Furthermore, the researcher also explained his experiences and how it could affect the objectivity of the data and outlined strategies to manage any form of researcher's biases in a form of researcher reflexivity at the beginning of this study (Shenton, 2014). The researcher also strictly adhered to the approved ethics procedures submitted to UG's Ethics Committee for Humanities (Ethics approval number: ECH 164/17-18). Finally, as part of ensuring thick description of the case, respondents' views and quotes from the documents reviewed were capture in the results of the study.

Transferability: In ensuring transferability of the research findings, the researcher provided enough contextual and background information about the case site, the University of Ghana was provided to enable readers for comparison with other institutions' environments to make such a transfer (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Maxwell, 2012; Erlandson & Edwards, 1993).

Dependability: To ensure consistency with which results of this study could be repeated and result in similar findings, the researcher documented all aspects of the research by offering a thick and thorough description of the methodology used to carry out the research. This was to enable readers to follow the methodology use to replicate this study in institutions with similar contexts as UG's (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability: To serve as a measure of the objectivity used in evaluating the results of this study, the study utilized multiple data sources: interviews and document reviews data sources were triangulated so that one data source could validate the other. In this study, interview results could be easily examined by other research through UG's IQA policy documents. All incidences that occurred in the course of the study were recorded in a reflexive journal. Also, the processes involved in the data collection, analysis and presentation were clearly explained by the researcher (Bowen, 2009; Koch, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of IQA management practices at the University of Ghana, four themes emerged from the data analysis. The themes revealed that the current IQA management system of University of Ghana is being modelled around systems model. The quality assurance management system consisted of four sub-systems made up of external environment, input, process and output sub-systems as discussed below:

Socio-political and economic contextual factors that influence UG's QA environmental sub-system

External environmental sub-system of UG's IQA consisted of actors and stakeholders such as the Ministries of Education and Finance, alumni, employers, professional associations, faculty, and students who present their various demands and whose influence on UG's educational activities in one way or the other drive quality assurance activities or act as barriers. The study found that for example, the embargo on recruitment of lecturers and non-teaching staff placed by the Ministry of Finance since 2011 made it impossible for UG to recruit enough lecturers to match ever-increasing students' enrolment and this has implication for quality teaching. Another influence from the environment was high demands for UG academic programmes as a result, UG continuous to struggle with high students to lecturer ratio with limited facilities and at the same time, the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) is demanding quality improvement and accountability from the universities. Another influence from the environment was government's control over the University's budgetary allocation. This study argues that social, political, and economic factors from the external environment was one of the contextual factors influencing effective operation of IQA system at UG as a public university.

During the interview with one of the senior members at the Academic Quality Assurance Unit, the influence of the external quality assurance agency was captured as follows:

> *… I must say that whatever we do here, it is to meet NAB's re/accreditation requirements. They also regulate our activities through academic audits, credential verification for our faculty. Before we recruit staff, we need financial clearance from the Ministry of Finance…* (Interviewee AQAU 1).

The finding showed that both internal QA system and the external QA system work together to achieve the same purpose but external QA system influences the internal QA system to ensure accountability and quality educational outputs.

Ensuring Quality of the Educational Input Sub-System at UG

The educational inputs dimension of UG's IQA system involves faculty and administrative staff, facilities such as lecture halls, library, laboratories, teaching and learning materials, students, fund and leadership. The quality and adequacy of these inputs determine the quality of the educational output. For example, UG's effort to ensure quality faculty was the implementation of a policy that requires a PhD as teaching qualification, job interviews and teaching demonstration and using cut-off grade point and admission interviews for specific programmes as part of quality assurance of the admission processes for new students into the university. In addition, various quality assurance committees have been established to ensure quality control.

A portion of UG's Quality Assurance Policy Manual stated:

> *Teaching staff appointed with just a second degree in exceptional circumstances, should register and obtain a PhD or terminal qualification within six years of date of employment. Failure to meet this stipulation would result in sanctions as given in the Conditions of Service* (AQAP, p.9).

The Academic Quality Assurance Unit (AQAU) also carries out facility audit at the beginning of every semester before commencement of lectures and moderation of course syllabus at the beginning of each semester. From the analysis, the result shows that UG's IQA policy adequately covers quality assurance of its educational inputs, process, and outputs. Quality assurance structures and systems were developed to ensure quality of staff and students' recruitment into the University. The results show evidence of UG's leadership commitment towards quality assuring its educational outcomes through its IQA policies, establishment of AQAU and establishment of quality assurance leadership decision making structures within the colleges, school, faculties, and departments.

Quality assurance measures within the educational process sub-system

The finding from the interviews and documentary sources shows that UG's current educational process sub-system centred on programme and course development and evaluation, teaching, assessment, and research activities. An assessment of UG's IQA policy revealed that the policy was very comprehensive in terms of procedures of quality assuring all the educational process sub-system activities. It made provision for quality actors to obtain quality feedback and communicate it to the inputs sub-system. Quality assurance feedback management mechanism as indicated specifically in section 11.1 of UG's Academic Quality Assurance Policy document page 13 outlined methods for evaluating teaching at the departmental level by students.

On quality management practices, the interview data revealed that currently, the AQAU conducts university-wide end of semester evaluation using online survey to obtain feedback from the students. In addition, some heads of departments (HOD) also adopted open door policy aiming at encouraging students to report their concerns to the office of HODs. This serves as additional feedback mechanism in addition to online survey This finding was aptly captured in an interview with one of the HODs: *The only tool that we have is the online survey using online questionnaire by students…, I think that is the only assessment tool we use currently"* (Interviewee, HOD 4).

The interview data shows that out of the five course/lecturer evaluation tools stipulated by UG's IQA policy, in practice, quality actors heavily relied on only online survey, which generates only quantitative report. During the interview with the participants from the AQAU, it emerged that students' participation in the online survey has reduced significantly since the evaluation was changed from paper questionnaire to online electronic questionnaire and this has been one of the major challenges of students' level of participation in IQA processes. In addition, some heads of departments indicated that they sometimes use informal feedback but it has not been documented to generate any report.

In practice, it emerged that all studied departments were in full compliance with the IQA policy that requires a PhD as teaching qualification at UG. Furthermore, in terms of staff development, the AQAU has been providing quality assurance orientation for new heads of departments and organizing training workshops for lecturers. However, some heads of departments complained about ineffectiveness of the quality workshops, as most lecturers do not attend. *When AQAU send notice to the Department for training workshops, most Faculty do not go because it is not compulsory and only few people attend "…* (Interviewee, HOD 5).

Ensuring Quality of Educational Within the Output Sub-System at UG

The finding from the data revealed the UG's educational outputs include the university's' products - graduates as educated citizens, research publications and community service. The data gathered from the AQAP demonstrated that UG considers quality of curriculum delivery as the preeminent priority through comprehensive AQPA policy guarding effective teaching and learning with the aim of producing quality graduates. The main quality monitoring tools being used was to enhance quality teaching were students' evaluation and peer review at the departmental level. UG has emphasized quality teaching as embedded in its mission statement. The mission of UG states:

> *The mission of the University is to develop world-class human resources and capabilities to meet national development needs and global challenges through quality teaching, learning, research, and knowledge dissemination* (AQAP p.2).

A portion of UG's Academic Quality Assurance Policy further stated that:

> *The departments are expected to review each existing course at least once every other year. Students' feedback are expected to be considered during the review and that of professional and accreditation bodies* (AQAP p.12).

The Academic Quality Assurance Unit plays a significant role in assuring quality curriculum delivery through the development of standards to guide curriculum activities. These standards include course syllabus template, which serves as a guide especially to the newly recruited teaching staff to easily get adjusted into the system. The template contains information on: course code and title, lecture period (s) and venue, prerequisites, course instructor, introduction/subject or, course overview, course objective/goals, learning outcomes, course delivery, plagiarism policy, assessment, grading scale and reading list or required text and 'Rules & Tools for Effective Teaching' developed for UG in 2010 by the International Quality Assurance Expert Committee to enhance quality curriculum delivery.

A key interviewee further indicated that:

> *… In order to foster and strengthen adherence to the University statutes, regulations and byelaws, and maintain high standards of integrity in the execution of the University's mission, the University has developed a code of conduct, which is considered crucial for quality assuring teaching and learning…* (Interviewee AQAU 2).

It also emerged from the data that within the departments where curriculum delivery take place, the head of departments serve as chief quality assurance officers by providing academic leadership. It also emerged that experienced lecturers and the heads of departments take newly appointed lecturers through an induction programme in course syllabus preparation, which has a downloadable template on the University's Quality Assurance Unit's Web Site. They also ensure newly recruited faculty undergoes mentoring process in teaching and assessment for at least a semester before he or she is assigned a course to teach.

Ensuring Quality Within the Educational Outcome Sub-System at UG Through Surveys

It has emerged from the data that quality managers at UG focused quality management effort on quality assuring educational input, process, and output sub-systems. Measures of quality of educational outcome through tracer studies, alumni survey, employer satisfaction survey, community perception surveys are yet to be implemented at the University and this article finds this as a gap in practice.

The review of IQA policy of UG showed that graduate exit survey and graduate tracer studies are supposed to be carried out by departments and AQAU to systematically collect data on the educational outcome and use it for quality enhancement of the university's activities within the educational processes sub-system. Feedback from stakeholders such as alumni, employers and professional bodies was considered in UG's IQA strategic policy as a means of obtaining educational outcome feedback. Section 6.4 of UG's IQA policy document charged the Academic Quality Assurance Unit to be obtaining feedback on the output of its educational activities as stated as follows: "*AQAU is required to generate data in a form of annual exit studies of graduating students as well as tracer studies"* (AQAP p. 8).

However, the result showed that the current practice of gathering information on educational output includes the use of graduate exit survey, students' internships/attachment, and research publication. The use of tracer study is one of the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC)'s accountability requirements from all tertiary education institutions but the results showed that the use of tracer study was completely absent at UG. Tracer study is highly considered not only for enhancing programme employability but also identifying skills required in the job market. It is also a means of encouraging multi-stakeholder participation in quality assuring educational inputs.

Involvement of Stakeholders in the Quality Management Processes at UG

One important theme that emerged from the data concerns different perceptions interviewees expressed about stakeholders' involvement in the quality management processes at UG. Some interviewees indicated that they have been involved and others indicated otherwise. For example, the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), as an external stakeholder is involved through accreditation, reaccreditation, evaluation of credentials and academic audit. Internally students are involved through student evaluation of teaching. However, some interviewees specifically complained that when it comes to development of quality assurance standards, they are usually not consulted. From the finding, if AQAU develops standards without consulting stakeholders, it then suggests the existence of top-down bureaucratic rather than organic quality management practice, which can negatively affect development of quality culture and ownership among the actors and stakeholders within the university. One HOD suggested in an interview that:

> *All of us can be involved for example through workshops and through the committee structures, and failure to do that was what seemed to have put off the majority of lecturer* (Interviewee HOD 6).

Another interviewee lamented that:

> *...Those of us within the units do not have sufficient power to carry out innovative QA practices but rather have been reduced to submitting documents and evidence of things we do at our departments to the AQAU at the expense of our teaching and research activities* (Interviewee HOD 2).

The lesson learned from the analysis was that top-down policy formulation and implementation did not seem to be working well in UG as the lecturers cherish their academic freedom. This finding also revealed gap in policy and practice as UG's IQA policy implementation principle 5.3 stipulates stakeholders' involvement and ownership. A section of the policy states that:

> *Staff and students have an obligation and responsibility to be fully involved in the quality assurance and enhancement of their own work as well as that of the University. Additionally, UG shall involve all staff in quality assurance and shall provide support and training for their professional and personal development especially junior staff whose efficiency and added value to UG would be improved by further training* (AQAP p.6).

It is clear from the analysis that development of UG's quality tools and standards were driven more by AQAU and influence from GTEC rather than academic staff at the departments, although UG's AQAP recommended broader internal stakeholders' engagement. This was a major gap in UG's policy and practice. In another department, one of the interviewed heads of departments expressed the following views regarding lack of departmental quality actor's participation in the development of emerging quality standards:

> *AQAU has just introduced exam moderation checklist without consulting us to check whether the checklist fit into how we assess our students and this was introduced in the deadline weak of exam moderation so we had to use it like that …* (Interviewee HOD 7).

The findings showed even though the Academic Quality Assurance Policy provides for both internal and external stakeholders' involvement, the policy is yet to be fully implemented.

Quality Assurance Management Support Structures and Feedback Management

Data from AQA policy manual and the interviews show existence of centralized and decentralized decision-making IQA structures at the university level and within the academic structures in a form of committees and boards at the college, school, faculty, and departmental levels. The University Council oversees the quality of UG's academic activities. While the Pro-Vice Chancellor, Research, Innovation and Development, and the Pro-Vice Chancellor, Academic and Students Affairs act as chief QA officers answerable to the council, provosts, deans, and heads of departments were the chief QA officers within the decentralized structures respectively and the AQAU coordinates activities of the boards and the committees. The study shows that these committees and boards within the decentralized structures were composed of only academics. The study observed that even though there was evidence of existence of decentralized IQA structure, there was lack of equal representation of required stakeholders on the boards and in the committees especially at the departmental level as stipulated in UG's AQAP (pp. 7-11).

Analysis of the current IQA decision-making structure of UG revealed absence of quality assurance officers at the college, school, faculty, and departmental levels to coordinate the activities of the various QA committees and boards within the decentralized structures. The absence of well-resourced QA offices within the decentralized structures have not only increased the workload of the academic staff but also it has made it difficult to close feedback loop with the lecturers and students as academic staff were compelled to perform both academic and management functions.

This was what the interviewee said:

…if we have quality assurance officers at the college level, they can provide administrative support to us but here we are doing both academic and administrative work and that is why some were late in submitting reports… (Interviewee HOD 5).

It has been found from the analysis that though UG has well-established quality assurance decision-making structures, the structure lacked dedicated quality assurance offices with trained quality assurance staff to coordinate and monitor the activities of the academic staff, the various boards and committees at the college, school, faculty, and departmental levels.

Mechanisms of assuring quality at UG

The findings showed that in assuring quality of core functions of the University quality assurance actors are guided by a mechanism that involved four steps.

Step 1: Self-review

The results emerging from analysis of documents and interviews shows that UG has an established self-review mechanism implemented by AQAU at the university-wide level assisted by the various QA committees at the college, school, faculty, and departmental levels in a form of monitoring and evaluation each semester and academic audit through data collection using survey instrument. Special self – review included course/lecturer evaluation by students every semester and annual teaching inspection by the Departmental Teaching Assessment Committee ((DTAC) which was confirmed by the interviewees as the current practices.

Step 2: Self-analysis

The data from UG's AQAP and interviews show that UG's current practice of self-analysis involves analysis of data generated by AQAU through online survey. Reports generated were normally sent to the academic leadership for remedial action to be taken with the faculty found lacking in certain areas of his or her duties. UG's AQAP provided adequate procedures for management of evaluation report but from the interview with the HOD, evaluation reports usually end at the dean's office making it impossible for departments to hold consultative discussion with faculties and students to close the quality feedback loop. All the sampled interviewees at the departments revealed that the end of semester course/lecturer evaluation feedback generated by AQAU for the past three years has not been sent to the lecturers and heads of departments since online evaluation started.

Six out of the ten heads of departments confirmed that they have never received the end of semester course/lecturer evaluation feedback from the AQAU since the evaluation was changed from manual to online. This finding revealed that the University has not been closing feedback loop with the lecturers and the students after evaluation.

During the interviews with the heads of departments, it also emerged that no department has formed the joint student-staff consultative committees stipulated in UG's AQAP which this study found to be a gap in policy implementation. The heads of departments claimed they were not aware of the policy that required the formation of the joint student-staff consultative committees. During the interview, a head of department confirmed this by saying:

I think that the evaluations that I have seen so far, there is no aspect that should be discuss with students, there is nothing to talk to the student about … However, as lecturers, we seek students' opinions and views of the way things are going. We talk to students on regular basis; we encourage them to tell us what they

think. There are many instances where students have complained about issues and we have addressed them in timely fashion. We respond to students' e-mails through the Sakai system (Interviewee, HOD 1).

Some of the heads of departments also said that they have never seen the UG's quality assurance policy document before. It can therefore be inferred from the interview data that some of the QA actors did not have complete knowledge of UG's IQA policy, hence the need to make the policy document available to both teaching and non-teaching staff.

Step 3: Self-feedback

The analysis of UG's quality policy manual indicated that lectures are required to receive evaluation feedback from the AQAU through the academic leadership to enable them do self-modification thereby closing the quality feedback. This has been UG's established channels of communicating evaluation feedback across the academic hierarchy to ensure that the quality feedback loop was closed. During the interviews, the HODs complained about lack of university-wide course/lecture evaluation feedback from the AQAU. This finding suggests that evaluation feedback communication channel was not effective thereby creating gap in policy text and practice. There is a need for AQAU to create a university-wide means of communicating evaluation feedback so that quality feedback loops with all the concerned quality assurance stakeholders are closed.

Step 4: Self-rectification

This element involves how evaluation feedback are to be implemented. UG's IQA policy clearly indicates how follow-up on recommendations from the feedback meeting at the departmental levels are to be conducted. The policy states that:

The head of department is required to discuss the two reports at a departmental meeting after which comments and suggestions on possible remedial actions to be taken are sent to the Dean and faculties are also expected to propose general modification plans and measures with reference to the requests of experts at the feedback meeting (AQAP, 2011 p. 13).

Interviews conducted with the heads of departments showed that students have not been involved in the quality feedback discussion meetings at the departments and since evaluation feedback from the university – wide evaluation have not been forthcoming to the departments, only feedback generated by departmental quality assurance committees and those from individual lecturers were usually discussed. This finding suggests that AQAU need to bridge feedback communication gap between offices of the pro-vice chancellors and the departments and try to enforce the formation of departmental joint staff-students consultative committee as stated in the UG's IQA policy.

This result in relation to involvement of stakeholders in the quality management processes at UG agrees with Eggins's (2014) study that found that external stakeholders influence tertiary education's IQA practices through funding and national laws governing tertiary education management. Despite UG's comprehensive quality assurance policy on data collection on student feedback, the study showed that there was no record of how students' evaluation feedback was used to close feedback loop and how the evaluation data informs quality improvements. The finding relating to quality assurance management support structures and feedback management, deviated from that of Mulliner and Tucker (2015) who identified two types of closing feedback loop and these are engaging students and engaging lecturers by communication of the feedback of evaluation and expected follow-up activities. The findings relating to feedback management are also not fully in line with the factors that enable internal quality assurance practices such as decentralized organizational structure, quality culture, committed leadership, effective feedback management communication system that closes the feedback loop with

stakeholders as suggested by Sampaio and Rosa (2012), Eggins (2014), Ganseuer and Pistor (2017). The benefits of developing QA culture are that the commitments of stakeholders and QA actors help to meet deadlines and exceed targets throughout all the IQA implementation levels as well as give power and urgency to IQA actors at the decentralized levels (Sursock, 2011).

In terms of UG's IQA systems, the finding is partially in line with Eggins (2014) whose findings showed that creation of IQA systems and structures could only function effectively when the right enabling factors are present. The findings on stakeholder involvement of the study also strengthened the arguments presented in the previous study by (Isabella et al., 2013). IQA prioritizes the representation of stakeholders in its structures, as evidenced by the involvement of students, academics, managers, alumni, and employers in all its Quality Committees and Boards. Furthermore, the findings also supported Isabella and Westerheijden et al. (2013)'s argument on active stakeholders' representation in IQA structures as IQA places importance on stakeholders' views through involvement of students, academics, management, professional bodies, alumni and employers in all quality committees and boards. This result on the top-down IQA system at UG is inconsistent with Sursock's (2011) findings on IQA system and structures in Europe involving academics and administration that operate using a single quality assurance policy. In the top-down approach system, organizational sub-units do not have autonomy and quality assurance decisions are usually taken by top management and impose it on the organizational sub-units. Leisyte and Epping (2012) and Ganseuer and Pistor (2017) however have a rival opinion as they found that lack of autonomy at the organizational sub-units, especially faculties and departments, coupled with rigidity of qualitative tools and standardized quantitative instruments, poor communication among quality actors, lack of integration of IQA with other management processes are the key barriers impeding successful implementation of IQA policies in the University of Ghana.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Academic Quality Assurance Policy of UG was very comprehensive and made provision for quality assuring all the core functions of the university. There were provisions to assure quality of educational input, process, output, and outcome but the current practice is yet to implement strategies to measure quality of UG's educational outcomes through tracer studies, alumni survey, employer satisfaction survey, and so forth. This article finds this as a gap in practice that quality actors need to improve on.

The AQAU should organize the following studies/surveys, to obtain feedback from all major stakeholders: tracer studies /alumni survey, students' satisfaction survey, employer satisfaction survey staff satisfaction survey, staff exit surveys and external community perception survey. Such studies/surveys should be organized on regular basis and the results should be used as inputs into the University strategic plan(s) and improvement in quality assurance service delivery in the University.

This implies that for quality actors to improve on current quality assurance management practice, the AQAU should consider setting up well-resourced quality assurance offices within the decentralized structures at college, school, faculty, and departmental levels. This will help coordinate IQA activities of the academic staff at the policy implementation staircases. It is recommended that AQAU should consider giving course/lecturer evaluation reports to all lecturers not only at the time of promotion and enforce implementation of joint student-staff departmental quality assurance consultative committee meetings as stipulated the UG's AQAP.

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