



Research Article

Quality Assurance in Private Higher Education Institutions in Ghana: Practices and Challenges

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Abstract: The study sought to unveil how private universities approach Quality Assurance (QA) practices (both internal and external QA practices) in order to achieve their institutional goals. To achieve this purpose, a qualitative approach was followed. The study employed phenomenology as a design to explore the views of key informants who were purposefully selected from the institutions. The key officers served as study participants due to their positions and functions which are directly related to QA issues and practices in the institutions. They were information-rich in the subject of the study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to generate data to answer the research questions. The study revealed that private universities adhere to the regulators' guidelines and directives in the execution of their responsibilities. Both internal and external practices are in line, hook and sinker manner with best practices although they faced some challenges in their bid to ensure quality in both administrative and academic functions of the universities. It is imperative, therefore, for some of the private universities to give priority to resourcing their QA units with well-equipped human and material resources in order to achieve their institutional goals.

Keywords: Quality assurance, internal quality assurance practices, external quality assurance practices and standards

1. Introduction

Formal education is the key institutional mechanism for developing human skills and knowledge, fundamental to transforming human and material resources for national development (Bunoti, 2012). A World Bank Report on Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that it is generally believed that modern economic and social development, all over the world, has become more skill-intensive requiring increasingly higher levels of education, technical competence and computer literacy (Saint & Lao, 2009). Higher education institutions are those that have the ability to train personnel for the socio-economic and industrial revolution of nations (Nsiah-Gyabaah, 2011). Universities have the wherewithal to produce the cadre of graduates with the competencies to contribute to the socio-economic and political development of national, regional and international economies. Both public and private higher education institutions play essential roles in producing the human capital required for the national and global development (Karaim, 2011). As public universities alone do not wield the capacity to meet the increasing access to university education, the private sector has been allowed the chance to participate in university education provisioning (Kubi, 2005). In a bid

to widen access to higher education across the world, the private sector has been permitted to partake in the provision of university education (UNESCO, 2017). In line with this view, private university education provision has been experienced in Ghana and many other countries for decades.

In both public and private universities, stakeholders expect QA to be taken seriously to aid them to fulfill their mandates in producing the human capital for national and global growth and development. QA drives higher institutions to achieve excellence in education (Karaim, 2011). So, like in public universities, systems are supposed to be in place to ensure that they provide the right cadre of graduates for the fields of work (Tam, 2001). In Ghana, in the initial stages of the life of private universities, they are affiliated with well-established public universities, termed as mentoring universities. The mentoring universities supervise the functions of the private universities till the latter gain charter after ten years and fulfil the requisite requirements. The private universities are supposed to conduct their businesses or activities by conforming to the regulations and directives of the regulators (National Accreditation Board-NAB, and National Council for Tertiary Education-NCTE) as well as their mentoring universities. In Ghana, NAB/NCTE regulates all tertiary institutions in terms of staffing, academic programmes, facilities and other relevant issues. In addition, the private universities are obliged to conform to the mentoring universities' directives and guidelines as they have been mandated by the regulators to play mentoring roles. The regulators and the mentoring universities closely monitor the activities of the private universities to ensure that they do not deviate from the directives and guidelines as having been spelt out to them. The mentoring universities, for instance, visit the private universities regularly to undertake different but relevant exercises concerning tuition offered to students, examinations, library facilities and infrastructure. They monitor the activities of private universities to ensure that the products measure up to the standard of their students.

1.1 Research problem

University education is expected to produce graduates who are ready to work in their various specialised fields of study. In the event that they are unable to live up to expectations, stakeholders become worried. For instance, the phenomenon of graduate unemployment is an issue of relevance to economic growth and national development (Boateng & Ofori-Sarpong, 2002). Employers largely feel that graduates are poorly prepared for the workplace to impact fully on the productivity and institutions' quality has been compromised to the extent of becoming centres for academic certificates acquisition rather than the training grounds for skills and knowledge acquisition (Ozor et al., 2016). According to Stukalina (2014), the quality of services universities provide has been a crucial tool for evaluating students' performance which plays a key role in educational management. These concerns have occasioned the conduct of studies on how QA issues are carried out in the universities. Cooke et al. (2016) explained that achieving educational relevance required matching institutional expansion to qualified academic staff. A study by the British Council also revealed how improved teaching and learning could increase the employability of graduates in different countries (British Council, 2016). A study examined quality control processes leading to improvement in teaching and learning outcomes in the universities of Manitoba (Cohen et al., 2007). Yakubova (2009) explored the perception of quality in higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan from both students' and administrators' perspectives while Musa's study (2019) sought to understand the roles of QA key performance indicators in research as well as examine differences in staff perceptions of the QA key performance indicators in universities. Utuka (2008) also compared the quality assurance policies and practices in higher education in New Zealand and Ghana with the view to ascertaining similarities and differences that each country attached to QA practices at the tertiary level. These studies demonstrate that researchers assessed the QA of universities around the globe. The myriad of studies on quality assurance, (such as Akareem & Hossian, 2016; Dattey et al., 2014; Seniwoliba, 2014; Materu & Righetti, 2010; Lenn, 2004; Lizzio et al., 2002; Newton, 2002), were conducted in public universities. Meanwhile, private universities which are under mentorship needed to be assessed to unravel how they ensure QA in their administrative and academic practices. This study brought into perspective the research gap which justified the need for this empirical-based research on QA practices of private universities in Ghana.

1.2 Research questions

The study sought answers to the following questions:

1. How do private universities approach QA in order to achieve their institutional goals?

2. What difficulties do private universities face in their bid to ensure QA to achieve their institutional goals?

2. Literature review

The concept of quality assurance is familiar in higher education institutions as it forms an integral part of the management of such institutions. Hayward (2006) defines quality assurance as a planned and systematic review process of an educational institution to determine whether or not acceptable standards are being realised, maintained and enhanced. Quality assurance is also regarded as all the policies, procedures and activities that are employed to validate and improve higher education institutions' performance (Harvey, 2002). The main intent of quality assurance in higher education is to support and boost the development of higher education institutions which consequently promotes educational accomplishments (Bobby, 2014). Quality assurance has an unavoidable role to play in realising higher education institutions' desired outcomes (Figurek et al., 2021) as it plays key roles in the establishment of higher education institutions, development of academic programmes and teaching and learning processes (Gift et al., 2006).

Quality assurance mechanisms are made up of accreditation, assessment, audit and external examination/moderation (Harvey & Newton, 2004). However, the mechanisms adopted to ensure quality in higher education institutions are broadly categorised into internal and external. In other words, quality assurance approaches can include mechanisms that are external and internal to schools. External mechanisms may include national or regional school evaluation and/or large-scale student assessments. Internal mechanisms may include school self-evaluation, staff appraisal and classroom-based student assessment (European Commission, 2018). Krasovska cited in Mochtar and San (2020) also refers to internal quality assurance practices to mean the policies and practices employed by higher education institutions to monitor and improve the quality of their education and construe external quality assurance to mean the policies and practices instituted by external bodies to assure the quality of higher education institutions and programmes. With a private higher education in Ghana, institutions experience external quality assurance practices via NAB/NTCE and the mentoring institutions.

Malunda et al. (2021) posit that internal quality assurance offers mechanisms through which an institution can assure that it has conditions in place that support quality teaching and learning. Internal quality assurance entails the activities and practices related to defining, assuring and raising quality in education institutions. Internal quality assurance includes assessment of teaching and learning processes by students, peer review of publications, monitoring of teaching and learning processes and enhancing students' welfare and publication (CHE & AfriQAN, 2012). Therefore, internal quality assurance is very quintessential in the attainment of institutional goals. Nonetheless, the implementation of both internal and external quality assurance practices results in the achievement of academic standards (Mochtar & San, 2020). All the quality assurance processes go a long to ensure quality education delivered to students, which invariably contributes to student learning and hence their academic achievement.

In view of the important roles that quality assurance plays in the management of higher education institutions, most institutions set up quality assurance units to serve as a point of contact for quality assurance and accreditation of institutions and programmes. The units are established and staff allocated to work there. The staff is in charge of the accreditation processes of the institutions (Nguyen et al., 2017). They also prepare and administer staff evaluation and self-evaluation forms, process them and report accordingly (Bunoti, 2012). Nguyen and Ta (2018) add that the staff of quality assurance units' responsibilities encompass the organisation of conferences, seminars and workshops on quality assurance, training of staff about quality assurance and being the focal point for preparing self-evaluation reports. Performing all these activities enormously contributes to the realisation of achievement of institutional goals and also building quality culture in the private higher education institutions.

It is asserted that quality assurance standards, policies and practices provide a framework and direction for the activities of higher education institutions (Nguyen & Ta, 2018). Adhering to these standards and practices helps institutions to build the quality culture to guide the conduct and activities of staff and students for the betterment of the education delivered to students. The need to build a quality culture in higher education institutions is non-negotiable to address the challenges in the operation of higher education institutions. As quality assurance helps the workings of the institutions to achieve their intended goals. Effective quality assurance systems also inform and promote continuous improvement and control in the management of quality education given by higher education institutions (Bunoti,

2012). In the environment where mentoring universities, even pre-moderate examination questions prior to their administrations, take part in the invigilation of the examinations, post-moderate the marked scripts, and also moderate project works before the private universities' students' marks are accepted, quality would be assured.

3. Methodology

3.1 *Research design and approach*

The intent of the study was to unravel how private universities approach their QA practices in order to achieve their institutional goals. The study followed the interpretive paradigm and a qualitative research method was employed to explore the QA practices of the private universities. To ensure that the studied institutions reflect all private universities in Ghana, two religious-owned and two individual-owned non-state-funded universities were selected for the study. Regarding the design, the study was based on phenomenology and used QA officers, deans of faculties and heads of academic departments who were in charge of QA issues in the four universities. Thus, the key officers in the universities in charge of quality assurance constituted the study population.

3.2 *Data collection tools and methods*

A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data from the participants. The interviews were conducted in the comfort of the participants' offices. The interview responses were recorded after express permission had been secured from the participants and the recordings were played back to them for confirmation. Documents needed for secondary data were also requested and used to generate results to buttress the interview data. The documents were collected and examined at the respective officers' offices since confidential documents were not to be taken away. Steps such as member checking, peer review and rereading were taken to ensure the rigour of the study results. All necessary protocols regarding qualitative data collection were scrupulously observed to garner credible data to answer the research questions.

3.3 *Data analysis*

The interview transcripts were transcribed and analysed following the general procedure of qualitative techniques such as familiarisation, transcription, organising, coding and analysis (Kuranchie, 2021). Content analysis technique was employed for the data analysis and the results were presented thematically. Sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the two major issues and their findings are discussed in relation to the existing literature.

4. Presentation of findings

4.1 *Quality assurance practices of private universities*

The first intention of the research was to discover the specific QA practices that the private universities undertook to ensure high standards in their delivery of education and to achieve their institutional goals. It emanated from the analysis that the following are the QA practices which the universities adopt to achieve their institutional goals: establishment of a QA office, review of programmes, student enrolment, staff recruitment and student evaluation.

4.1.1 *Quality assurance office*

The responses show that the institutions had similar approaches to ensure continuous improvement through their internal quality assurance offices as required by NAB/NCTE. The institutions had QA offices which were manned by senior officers of senior lecturer and professorial ranks. The officers had oversight responsibilities in the units, departments and faculties of the universities in ensuring that staff performed their functions in adherence to the laid down policies and regulations as also observed by Seniwoliba (2014). Through the QA offices, the institutions undertake periodic internal valuations of their activities for the assurance of quality education delivery.

The quality assurance unit is working hard to achieve the set objectives and there is a need for continuous enhancement to reflect current trends in the industry [CQA1, MQA4].

There is a quality assurance unit that has been mandated to develop policy and guidelines concerning quality assurance, among other things [CQA1].

The quality assurance office is doing well by ensuring that the policies and procedures are well implemented.

We also always improve on the way we do things [MQA1].

The QA units organise workshops on quality assurance issues for staff and evaluate the performance of lecturers per semester. It also moderates examination questions prior to the external pre-moderation by the mentoring universities.

Questions that are not of the required standards are sent back with comments to the respective lecturers for improvement [CQA2].

Before a semester begins, the QA unit requests course allocations from all HoDs to ascertain the qualifications of the lecturers assigned to teach the various courses [CQA4].

The lecturers come up with course outlines (scheme of work) for the semester detailing the course descriptions and objectives meant to achieve the set standards [MQD2].

4.1.2 Review of academic programme

The institutions ensured both internal and external reviews of their programmes to aid in achieving institutional goals. The institutions' academic programmes go through QA accreditation process to ensure that they are duly certified prior to putting them on sale. When programmes are developed, they go through an internal review process before availing them to the mentoring universities and then to the regulatory bodies for accreditation. Both the regulators and the mentoring universities review the intended programmes in line with the national skills framework, so that the prospective applicants acquire the requisite skills and knowledge after graduation.

A newly developed programme is scrutinized at the department and faculty levels before the quality assurance and academic board approved for accreditation [CQA1].

All programmes go through a rigorous accreditation process for certification before the commencement [MQD2].

In the quality assurance document, all the programmes run are reviewed within a period of four years to ensure that they match the current happenings of industry because certain subjects become outmoded at some point in time and need replacement [CQD2].

Correspondences between the regulatory bodies and the mentoring universities as well as other relevant documents to that effect were made available for authentication. The documents amply demonstrated that private universities do a lot to ensure adherence to the regulators' guidelines. The private universities do have frequent interactions with both the regulators and the mentoring universities concerning mounting new academic programmes.

4.1.3 Student enrolment

The institutions ensure that qualified students are offered admission. The regulatory agencies have criteria that students need to meet before admission is offered. For instance, applicants' entry qualifications and prior learning experiences are critical in deciding who qualifies to be admitted. The agencies periodically ensure that the universities adhere strictly to these requirements.

The criteria for admission are based on the minimum requirements of our mentoring institutions and NAB.

The university ensures that students admitted for the programmes have the required qualifications [MQD4].

The institutions go by the general enrolment standards of NAB. Prior to admission, students' academic achievements and competence are examined with respect to the choice of programme to determine the placement or entry level.

The general enrolment requires basic qualifications for all the faculties. Similarly, with placement advancements, the subject relevance is considered [CQD1].

Policy documents, students' application forms and other documents related to student admission confirmed the primary data provided by the participants. The documents showed that due to differences in some applicants' previous programmes of students, they were placed at Level 200 while those without such prior academic background were

placed at L100.

4.1.4 Staff appointments, development and promotion

The institutions ensure that qualified staff is recruited to work for them. Appointments were done with the view to ensuring that quality staff with the capacity to deliver were hired. The institutions mostly used the following criteria in considering applications for employment: credentials, qualifications and experience. This starts right from the recruitment through the selection and placement phases of employment. When it comes to staff appointments, the institutions tend to employ people with relevant skills, academic qualifications, and right experiences.

Applicants first submit application letters and CVs. The university examines the applicants' documents to select the right ones and subject them to rigorous interviews. Finally, candidates of excellence are considered by way of ensuring higher productivity [CQD1].

The registrar refers applications to the various Heads of Department for review and they recommend or disapprove of them; after which, the approved applications are sent to the appointment and promotions Council for appointment [MQA1, CQD3].

Lecturers have been getting promoted when they fulfil the three key requirements of teaching well, doing community service and publishing quality papers [MQD5].

Participants, however, had some reservations:

The QA committee is supposed to be part of the appointment and promotions of lecturers but is usually not invited [CQA5].

Staff induction for newly hired staff to take off smoothly is not taken seriously. When one is appointed to work in the university, they don't give orientation on some important aspects of the workings of the university [CQA2].

Staff development activities seem to be taken seriously in the institutions as per the responses provided by the study participants. Staff development activities were organized for both academic and administrative staff to upgrade their competence and job delivery (Dicker et al., 2019).

The staff of the university undergoes a lot of training programmes in and outside the university. Almost all staff have been attending workshops and seminars to learn more about their job responsibilities [CQD5].

Our university has a seminar period in the timetable when people from within and outside talk about various issues for the education of staff. [CQD6].

The staff development programme is good at the university. We have attended a number of training, seminars and conferences to learn various stuff to improve our work performance [MQD3, MQD4].

The institutions also had a staff promotion policy that guided them. Staff who merited promotion went through stringent procedures and processes. Documents were available to show the requirements that both administrative and academic staff ought to meet before promotion.

Lecturers submit a certain number of academic publications as a key requirement for academic staff to be promoted [CQD5].

Every academic is promoted based on how visible they are in the academic cycles by publishing in high-quality journals [CQD1].

We have affiliated with public institutions and act as quality. The universities act as assurance agencies to us in terms of external activities and so we cannot do things anyhow [MQA1].

We pay much attention to research; we organize seminars for the university community on the importance of research and through that, we get feedback on the standards of teaching and learning [CQA1].

The responses indicate that the private institutions ensured that well-qualified staff were employed to work for them. They also took staff development issues very important and did that through the organisation of conferences, symposia, seminars and workshops to upgrade the knowledge and update the competencies of both academic and administrative staff. These continuous professional development activities were good for the development of the institutions (Kuranchie & Addo, 2017). Secondary data were made available to verify the authenticity of the steps taken to ensure that qualified prospective staff was employed.

4.1.5 Teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are core activities of educational institutions which are vital to the achievement of institutional goals and objectives. The participants held the view that adequate steps were taken, at all times, to ensure that lecturers deliver quality education to their students which is in conformity to offering quality education through the ‘trinity function’ of universities involving teaching, research and community service (Agba, 2015).

When school reopens, lecturers are expected to prepare their course outlines from the course descriptions and go through them with students; indicate how Cas and exams marks are awarded and how they should be assessed [MQA1].

Within the faculty, at the beginning of the semester, course outlines are collected from the various lecturers and are peer reviewed to see if they meet the course descriptions that are provided in the programmes being run. The offices are also open for students when they have enquiries [MQA3, CQD2].

More so, in support of quality teaching and learning being a major goal of quality education as reiterated by Agba (2015). When teaching and learning go on expectedly, the institutions are likely to achieve their set goals.

We ensure quality in teaching and learning in the institution. The programmes are guided by the curriculum to ensure quality. The rules and policies are adhered to in the governance of the university [CQD2].

The institutions also resourced their faculties for effective delivery. This makes it easy to get reaccreditation and also helps to know who should teach what courses and how students are faring.

People always say we are mean with marks but then when they go out, they see the difference [CQD3].

4.1.6 Course evaluation

Quality assurance was also assured through students’ evaluation which was done to gauge the teaching of courses and learning environments. The institutions tended to ascertain feedback on the core business of the institutions. Student evaluation of courses, tracer and satisfactory survey studies were some means the institutions employed to get feedback on the work of staff. Students were made to assess lecturers’ outputs from time to time using predesigned instruments with questions covering areas such as lecturers’ mode of delivery, pedagogy and learning environment.

The institutions have put different tools in place to constantly verify how these objectives are met. These procedures are aimed at helping the institutions to fulfil their missions [CQD1].

The data obtained is used to make decisions such as improvement in the classroom, assignment and reassignment of the lecturers to various courses [MQA1].

Feedback from students assesses lecturers every semester and the feedback show how lecturers perform whereas lecturers, in turn, assess students’ performance [CQD2].

A students’ satisfaction survey was carried out, at times, to assess how teaching and learning met students’ satisfaction. It was also disclosed that exit surveys were conducted by the universities.

This is done with the final-year students to assess the knowledge that they acquired throughout the years in the school to ascertain whether their expectations have been met [MQA1].

Another tool used for quality assurance is tracer study. With tracer studies, students who had completed the universities’ programmes within the last five years participated in them. The institutions conducted graduate surveys to find out how graduates fare in the workplaces based on the knowledge acquired during their studies. As the prime focus of the QA unit, institutional excellence should be measured by improvements in students’ learning in line with the quotation below as confirmed by Uysal (2015) “Are graduates having jobs or not? What types of graduate jobs do they find? How many further their studies? How are they faring in the world of work”? The surveys also elicited data from employers of their graduates to ascertain whether they were satisfied with their graduates’ performance.

We do this to find out from the students how they are faring on the job market and other things that can be done to improve the quality of teaching and learning [MQA1].

We do contact employers of the graduates of the institution to find out their performance. Programmes reaccreditations are also sent to the industry so that the industry can make contributions as to whether the content will meet the industrial expectations [CQD3].

Samples of evaluation forms, satisfactory survey questionnaires and tracer study report forms were made available to the researchers. The samples confirmed and authenticated the interview data.

4.1.7 Student assessment or examination

Assessment of students took place in the semester (continuous assessment) and at the end of the semester (end-of-semester examination). The two forms of assessment constituted the students' final grade for the semester's grade in a course. The institutions ensured quality in these two forms of examinations:

For instance, we ensure that the processes of examination are duly followed for the mentoring institutions to go through the questions (pre-moderation), and get them back in time for the students to write [MQA1, CQA1].

Lecturers submit examination questions that are peer reviewed internally prior to the pre-moderation by our mentoring institutions. [CQD2, MQD3].

The institution ensures that questions are submitted early with marking schemes and sent to the mentor institutions and external examiners to access. The laboratories are made available all the time for students to undertake the exercises and revise lessons [MQA1].

The faculties held meetings to peer review examination questions and results to ensure quality at the department level. The institutions also run workshops and seminars which help staff to effectively deliver teaching and supervise student learning.

There is a skilled laboratory that caters to the courses with chemical components for demonstration. Such that anytime a lecturer teaches or demonstrates it is recorded for future plans [CQD2].

The appropriate officers provided samples of pre-moderated and post-moderated questions and forms to add more value to the interview data. The volumes of pre-moderated and post-moderated examination materials showed that the mentoring universities did not leave anything to chance. They really ensured that the private universities were up to scratch with their QA responsibilities so that they would achieve their institutional goals.

4.2 Challenges in ensuring quality assurance practices

Adhering to the guidelines of regulators to ensure quality delivery of education at tertiary institutions does not happen without challenges (Boateng, 2014). Consequently, the study explored how private universities approach their quality assurance practices in order to achieve their institutional goals. The analysis revealed two categories of challenges that the institutions encounter while ensuring QA practices. They are challenges that emanate from regulators and mentoring universities; they had external root causes (termed external related challenges) and those that were from within the universities; had internal root causes (termed internal related challenges).

4.2.1 Internal-related challenges

The study revealed that bureaucracy, inadequate facilities, inadequate personnel and high cost as the internal-related challenges confronting the universities' adherence to QA practices. In the implementation of QA in the institutions, they experienced bureaucracy as they had to go through many processes. The processes of ensuring that all staff and units within the universities adhere strictly to best practices were also laborious and time-consuming.

Sometimes the procedure involved in taking decisions or sanctioning wrongs takes too long such that by the time the decision is taken, the person involved might have gotten a new place and gone. That renders the QA measures ineffective [MQA1].

The issue of qualified personnel to man the QA units was a challenge. Although there were officers in charge of the QA units, not all of them were up to the level expected. There was also an inadequate number of administrative staff to help effectively operate the QA units.

There is an inadequate number of administrative staff for the operation of the quality assurance and the officer in charge is also not up to the level [MQA4].

Such an office needs a very senior academic to head with an array of other categories of staff to help execute the responsibilities [MQA2].

The human resource of the unit, currently it is manned by only one person who has additional responsibilities [CQA1].

The office has only one staff member with an PhD who operates from the office dedicated to the unit [CQD5].

The office is manned by only one person who has additional responsibilities. The QA staff does not work there on full-time bases [CQD1, CQD3].

The quality assurance office is higher and should be manned by a very senior member with the rank of a Dean who has much experience in the workings of the university. This is because he or she plays the role of a gatekeeper [CQD5, CQD6].

The office of the QA units was also an issue. In some of the institutions, the offices were not spacious enough for such a unit.

The institution's quality assurance unit operates from a very small office where students walk in and out; as such documents cannot be kept there safely [MQA2].

Due to the sensitive nature of the unit in exercising oversight responsibilities over the entire institution, it requires an additional human resource and a furnished office space with a renowned Professor as the head and supported by administrative staff [CQD1].

4.2.2 External-related challenges

Irregular visitation by regulators, high cost and bureaucracy were the main external related challenges that the institutions faced in their adherence to QA practices in their operations.

The mentoring universities and NAB/NCTE did not regularly visit the universities to perform their regulatory responsibilities. The participants believed that although the mentoring institutions did a lot to help them perform their responsibilities, they did not visit the private universities frequently.

Yes, the mentoring institutions help us perform our functions, yet their visits are infrequent and they also fail to organize training for our staff. Their work is not enough [MQA1].

The QA process was also an issue for private universities.

The staff believed using the Quality Matters Rubric with a qualitative approach was not good as it does not permit respondents to provide detailed reports of issues on their responsibilities [CQD2].

The process of ensuring that the regulators perform their oversight responsibilities go with a cost. Besides the affiliation fees, the private universities incurred a lot of costs in getting the mentoring universities and NAB performed some crucial functions. This, at times, delayed invitation of the regulators to visit the universities.

We spend a lot on the visitations by the experts who come to do work for the accreditation board and our mentor [CQD4].

The process of getting a new programme accredited was very bureaucratic and time-consuming. The designed programme must be approved by the mentoring university prior to assessment by NAB. It usually took months for new programmes to go through these processes.

NAB comes to ensure the institution meets minimum standards required by them. Failure to comply with NAB's requirements means the programmes will not be accredited [MQD2].

The fact that NAB puts much pressure on the private institutions as against the public institutions [CQD3, MQA1].

In the performance of their duties, the private universities encountered conflicting directives and expectations from the regulator and the mentoring institutions, at times. While the regulators wanted you to do 'A', the mentoring universities wanted you to do 'B'. There were, at times, the private universities became confused as to whose instruction or directive to take and it had to take some time and efforts to get the confusion resolved.

At times, we experience conflicting directives from NAB and our mentoring universities. While NAB wants you to do A, our mentoring universities want you to do B. We encounter this from time to time [CQD5].

The challenges encountered by the private universities are consistent with the discovery that efforts aimed at improving the quality of higher education service delivery are severely constrained by factors such as economic, political, academic and administrative including issues of underfunding of the educational sector; deteriorating working conditions, staff developmental needs (Agba, 2015; Bunoti, 2012). These challenges are a bane to the progress of private universities which need the attention of stakeholders of higher education institutions in the country.

5. Conclusions

The results of the study portray that largely, QA practices were adhered to by the private universities which aid them in achieving their institutional goals, not without challenges though. Private higher education can be justified as a strategic investment in human capital formation in addition to the public sector to boost productivity and enhance national economic competitiveness. To achieve that, institutions need to take their quality assurance practices seriously. QA practices are thus vital in the running of private universities as they contribute immensely to quality education delivery. Both the regulators and mentoring universities take necessary steps to ensure that private universities work in tandem with acceptable standards. Also, the institutions make internal arrangements to enable them to reach their objectives. The regulators and mentoring institutions extend their monitoring exercise to enable students who patronise the services of private universities to get value for money. Stakeholders also yearn for quality and continuous improvement in the activities of private universities.

The outcomes of the research revealed that staff recruited to handle the institutions' academic and administrative programmes are in line with requirements of the regulatory agencies. QA plays an essential and relevant role in the operations of the universities. The units perform creditably well with QA policy documents providing guidance on QA issues in the institutions.

Nonetheless, the institutions encountered challenges such as inadequately qualified officers and bureaucratic and high expenditure, among others. For instance, an important office such as the QA unit ought to be manned by officers with the requisite professional background to be able to help design good curricula for the institutions. The units also ought to be well-furnished and to a full secretariat backed by adequate administrative staff for effective operation. The institutions that lacked these essentials ought to attend to them in order to have more functional QA units to help achieve their institutional goals.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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