Assessing Students' Experiences of Internal Quality Assurance Practices in Selected Private Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: *Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) is a higher education management tool that seeks to address largely all practices that hinder the realization of stakeholders' expectation of quality. This study focused on assessing students' experiences of internal quality assurance practices of private Higher Education Institutions. A sample of 341 respondents was drawn from Garden City University College and Christian Service University College in Ghana. The result revealed that, students have good knowledge concerning IQA and their academic level and programme of study were found to be significantly associated with their knowledge level. Also, students were not satisfied with their level of involvement in IQA issues and leadership commitment to quality in general. However, students expressed high satisfaction with the state of learning resources and the competence of the academic staff available to them. Internal quality assurance systems which adequately involve students and promote quality culture should be established.*

Keywords: Internal quality assurance, private higher education institutions, Garden City University College, Christian Service University College

1. Introduction

The quality of higher education (HE) provision is becoming a major area of interest for governments and all other stakeholders of education [1]. Generally, education is seen as an important tool, means and catalyst for a nation to develop socially and economically[2]. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for instance contribute hugely to the human capacity building and knowledge creation for development which directly or indirectly contribute enormously towards reducing poverty, building a peaceful, stable, independent and self-sustaining society. Therefore, stakeholders of higher education called for the development of Quality Assurance (QA) within higher education systems so as to enact their expectation of quality.

The concept of QA in higher education system which was first practiced by HEIs in developed nations, is gradually gaining support and preference in African universities [3]. Enrolment explosion, resource scarcity, increasing competition as against collaboration among higher education institutions, increasing stakeholders' interests and the rapid emergent convolution of knowledge characterizing higher education in Africa have catalyzed the general acceptance of QA concept [4][5]

In response to the need for ensuring quality in higher education systems, it has become mandatory that institutions establish Internal Quality Assurance systems (IQAs). The term IQAs is used in education to describe the processes whereby systems, mechanisms and policies are put in place by a specific HEI to ensure that it is actually fulfilling its commitments and providing to their students is of quality education that meet standard threshold [6]

The worth of graduates from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) hugely depends on the quality of learning experiences students receive during their period of study. Therefore, it is imperative that, managers of HEIs take into accounts the concerns of key stakeholders like students, when formulating and implementing quality assurance (QA) policies.

Policies are not self-explanatory neither self-executing [7]. This means, though policies could be useful, efforts should be directed at adequately involving all stakeholders during the formulation and implementation stages so as to achieve a successful implementation practices.

In Ghana, notwithstanding all the policies put in place by the higher education institutions providers to enact quality, the challenges of implementation of such policies still remains unresolved [5][8][9] For instance, cultural adaptability and capacity-building are some constraints of QA implementation in Ghanaian Technical Universities [5]. Low academic staff to students' ratio, absence of quality culture, physical and financial resources constraint, low commitment and support for QA related issues; and nonexistence of a current strategic plan are some of the common challenges hindering quality assurance practices in Ghanaian public universities [23]. Also, it has been indicated that students' inadequate involvement in IQA is one key barrier to IQA [8]. However, in recent years there is an increasing recognition of students' role in IQA in Europe [10]

In view of this, the study is focused on assessing students' experiences of the implementation practices of quality assurance in selected private university colleges in Kumasi.

2. Objectives Of Study

1. To determine the knowledge level of students on IQA practices in the studied institution and factors that influence students' knowledge level.
2. To investigate students' experiences of IQA practices and the institutional commitment to such practices in studied institutions.
3. To find out students' satisfaction with quality of learning resources and support services at the studied institutions.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 The Concept of Quality

What actually make(s) up quality and who should define it are disputes to be resolved in higher education. These disputes exist owing to the different perceptions held by stakeholders. Nonetheless, there are some definitions put up by some scholars and gurus in the area which have been given due recognition.

Table 1: Definitions of Quality

Author (S) and Year	Definitions	Major Themes
Crosby (1979) cited in [18]	Quality is defined as "conformance to requirement"	Accountability to stakeholders
Gilmore (1974) cited in [18]	Quality is "the extent to which the wants of a specific consumer are met by the provision of a specific products"	Conformance to specification
Juran (1974) cited in [18]	A product meeting customer needs leading to customer satisfaction	Fitness for purpose
Gronroos (1983) cited in [18]	Meeting and/or exceeding customers' expectations.	Customer satisfaction
Deming (1968) cited in [18]	Full and perfect conformance to the requirements of customers	Zero defects

So, in practice, the definition of quality depends on several factors. As the meaning of these independent variable continually changes, the single universally accepted definition will be difficult to achieve. Regardless of all forms of differences, the underlying philosophy of all the definitions is the same thus, focusing on the customer. Harvey recognized five extensive approaches to quality in higher education [11]. Arguably, the most comprehensive definition of quality was given by this author. These are;

- **Quality as excellence:** This approach to quality deems higher education institution of being quality only when it is able to demonstrate exceptionally high standards in its practices [12].
- **Quality as perfection:** Quality as perfection, relates closely to the concept of "zero defect" commonly employed in the constructional and industrial settings, where the physical products of a produce have to meet up with the accurate pre-specifications of the desired product, without any defects but in their perfect state [13]. Since higher education institutions do not aim to bring forth graduate without defects, quality as perfection does not exist in higher education [14]
- **Quality as fitness for purpose**: This approach to quality generally judges quality by the extent to which the intended purpose of the product or service is met. In the perspective of education, Mhlanga's view of the fitness for purpose approach to quality is generally a notion of all stakeholders, who are external to HEIs who usually place value on the instrumental function or role played by academic institutions in the training and development of graduate [3].
- **Quality as value-for-money:** The perception of quality as value-for-for money hinges on accountability. Accountability is central to this approach and as such can be described as to the heart of the approach [5]. A quality good or service is type that ensures high level functioning and operation as against cost [15]. This approach to quality is also likened to the concept of efficiency and effectiveness in relation to resource utilization and management [13]
- **Quality as transformation:** Quality as transformation in education, states that transformative education is the type that adds value to the learner. This approach is focused on enhancing knowledge, attitudes and skills.

3.2 Evolution of quality assurance in Higher Education (HE)

HE which is designed to produce graduates with adequate knowledge, attitude and skills to solve the problems of society has been characterized by limited enrolment of students with adequate support from the state [16]. In the 21st century higher education institutions all over the world are characterised by students' population explosion due to social and economic demand for highly educated human resources [17]. High demand and mass participation have had a very strong effect on higher education systems and their institutions in the direction of the kinds of academic programmes to run and the modes of delivery of such programmes [19]. Due to massification of enrolment in education, there could be a potential decline in the training provided to students or generally lower academic standards [20]. Larger enrolment logically requires more funds to provide infrastructures and tools to assist in students' training. But the declining capacity of states to fund the increasing demand for higher education is introducing new dynamisms into higher education provision and regulation [5]. Presently, to meet the high demand of higher education, its provision is not only by the traditional public universities but by private providers as well [21]. The mode of provision has also diversified as there is distance and online provisions in addition to the traditional on-campus provision [5]. This is eventually raising questions on the state of academic standard, whether it will be maintained or not in times of such student population explosion [22].

Globalization has eroded the boundaries between countries [4]. This has given some element of enhancement to the movement of students, academics, educational programmes and institutions [23]. But the challenge to the HEIs exists in the quality of academic training that is received by students to help them fit well in both local and international societies. This makes it imperative for higher education institutions to observe quality practices by adopting internationally recognized quality assurance models.

1) Students' Expectation and Experience of Quality

Studies have revealed that, students' participation, motivation and experiences are strongly influenced by the level to which their expectations are met [24]. Students' experiences and satisfaction are enhanced, provided the HEIs are able to meet their expectations [25]. Thus, in a free market, whenever a customer's expectation is in excess of experience, it indicates quality is low and this may eventually result in customer dissatisfaction; on the other hand, whenever an experience is in excess of expectation, it indicates the perceived quality is high which eventually may cause customer satisfaction [26]. Customer expectation is dynamic and also varies among individuals [27]. Therefore, managers of HEIs must personalize students' expectations instead of treating all students as the same.

Methodology

A target population of undergraduate students in Garden City University College and Christian Service University College totaling 3000 were available for the study. However, a representative sample of 188 and 153 undergraduate students were drawn from the two institutions respectively. A total sample size of 341 was drawn for the study. The study used Taro Yamane's formula to draw the representative sample size for the study.

The Yamane's formula is represented as - $n = N / [1 + N (e)^2]$ [28][31]
When 'n' represents sample size
'N' represents research population
'e' represents research error (5%)

A structured questionnaire with two sections comprising the respondent's demographic information (*Gender, Age, Academic year, and programme of student*) and quality assurance implementation practice were administered to the undergraduate students.

Data were categorized and analyzed using Measure of Central Tendencies (Means) and Measure of Dispersion (Standard Deviations). Chi-Square test (X^2) and binary Logistic regression test were used to test the degree of associations and statistical significance between variables with a 95% Confident Interval (CI) and alpha value of 0.05.

4. Results and Discussion

The Knowledge Level of Students on Internal Quality Assurance

Students with good perception were 88.6% where as 11.4% had low perception on IQA practices in the selected institutions. This is in line with Keelson who reported that, there was good students' perception of teaching and learning in Ghanaian polytechnic institutions [29]. However, having good or low perception of IQA is not an indication of being adequately involved in the processes and practices of IQA of institutions. The popular and highly desired "quality culture" in higher education can be realized only when there is an active student participation in IQA.
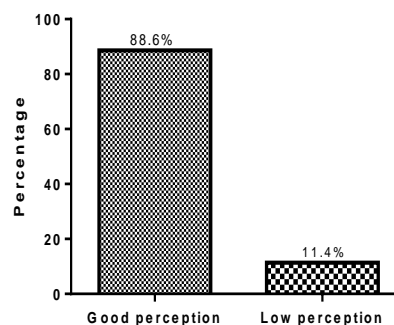

Figure 1: Proportion of Students with Good and Low Internal Quality Assurance Perception

Table 1 below shows the general characteristics of students stratified by knowledge level of quality assurance practices. Age was not significantly associated with knowledge on IQA practices (p =0.061). This is not in agreement with Akareem and Hossain [10], who indicated that age as a factor has a significant influence on the perception and experiences of students about QA practices [10]. More males (54.3%) had good knowledge about IQA compared to the females (45.7%). However, gender was not significantly associated with knowledge level of IQA (p = 0.095) and this confirms the findings of Akareem and Hossain [10]. Nonetheless, academic level and students' programme of study were significantly associated with knowledge on IQA practices (p<0.001). This implies that both the academic level of theirs and their programme of study have significant influence on their level of knowledge of the quality assurance system. This gives indication that, there is significant variation in the level of students' knowledge regarding IQA between two students belonging to different academic level or two students who are taking different programme of study.

Table 2: General Characteristics Stratified by Quality Assurance Perception Levels of Study Participants

Variables	Poor, n (%)	Good, n (%)	X^2, df	P –value
Age categories			7.4, 3	0.061
<25	27(69.2)	245(81.1)		
25 – 35	12(30.8)	45(14.9)		
36 – 45	0(0.0)	6(2.0)		
>45	0(0.0)	6(2.0)		
Gender			0.03, 1	0.095
Male	21(53.8)	164(54.3)		
Female	18(46.2)	138(45.7)		
Academic level			24.0, 3	<0.001
100	3(7.7)	81(26.8)		
200	12(30.8)	132(43.7)		
300	21(53.8)	59(19.5)		
400	3(7.7)	30(9.9)		
programmes			22.5, 2	<0.001
Health related	18(46.2)	57(18.9)		
Business	18(46.2)	120(39.7)		
Others	3(7.7)	125(41.4)		

Table 3: Factors Associated with Good Quality Assurance Perception among Study Participants

Variable	β – coefficient	OR(95%CI)	P – value
Age			
<25		1	
25 – 35	-0.9	0.4(0.2 - 0.9)	0.021
36 – 45	-	-	-
>45	-	-	-
Gender			
Male		1	
Female	-0.1	0.9(0.5 - 1.9)	0.957
Academic level			
100		1	
200	-0.9	0.4(0.1 - 1.5)	0.174
300	-2.3	0.1(0.0 - 0.4)	<0.001
400	-0.9	0.4(0.1 - 1.9)	0.239
Programme of study			
Health related		1	
Business	0.7	2.1(1.0 - 4.3)	0.044
Others	2.6	13.2(3.7 - 46.5)	<0.001

Students with age, 25 – 35 years are associated with significantly reduced odds of good IQA perception compared to those <25 years (OR = 0.4, p 0.021). This implies that, comparing students between 25 to 30 years and those less than 25 years, students less than 25 years relatively have good perception towards IQA systems in the selected institutions. Though statistically insignificant, females were associated with reduced odds of good IQA perception (OR = 0.9, p = 0.957) as compared to males. Students taking other courses other than Health and Business related programmes were associated with increased odds of good IQA perception.

Experiences of Students with IQA Practices in Selected Institutions

Obviously, more than half (>50%) of the students generally perceive that apart from the rules and policies to be taken to ensure quality, the rest of the variables measured in table 3 are at best, rarely practiced. The least commonly practiced variables are those pertaining to promoting quality in the studied institution. Thus, a maximum of only a quarter of the respondents believe that brochure and leaflets on quality related issues are supplied to them. Also, the students reported that, meetings are rarely called to discuss quality in the studied institutions as seen item (4, 5 and 6) of table 3. These practices ought to improve because they are pivotal to promoting quality and inculcating quality culture into the students.

Table 4: Quality Assurance Practices experienced by study participants

Variables	Often N (%)	Rarely N (%)	No N (%)
QA Practices			
Questionnaires on general satisfaction	136(39.9)	147(43.1)	58(17.0)
Questionnaires on course evaluation	143(41.9)	90(26.4)	108(37.7)
Questionnaires on effectiveness of teaching	138(40.5)	121(35.5)	82(24.0)
Department meetings on quality of educational provision	95(27.9)	124(36.4)	122(35.8)
Meetings on issues related to quality	111(32.6)	133(39.0)	97(28.4)
Meetings to discuss academic matters	77(22.6)	133(39.0)	131(38.4)
Orientation programmes	164(48.1)	147(43.1)	30(8.8)
Regular meetings discussing student challenges	102(29.9)	126(37.0)	113(33.1)
Rules and policies to ensure quality	174(51.0)	111(32.6)	56(16.4)
Brochures on quality issues	88(25.8)	141(41.3)	112(32.9)
Leaflets on quality issues	70(20.5)	142(41.6)	129(37.9)

Table 5: Student satisfaction with teaching-learning process, assessment practices and teachers' competence

No.	Variables	Mean	SD	t-test	P-value
	Institutional commitment			T-test value = 3	
1	General institutional leadership commitment for quality	2.76	0.88	-5.09	<0.001
2	Leadership commitment towards student learning	2.77	0.90	-4.78	<0.001
3	Academic staff commitment towards quality teaching	2.84	1.10	-3.16	0.002
4	Involvement of students in QA practices	2.88	0.98	-2.25	0.025
5	University's reputation	3.40	1.0	7.4	0.003
	Academic staff quality				
6	Academic staff quality	3.34	1.30	4.98	<0.001
7	Academic staff professional competence	2.89	1.15	-1.98	0.048
8	Level of cognitive stimulation in course delivery	2.96	1.12	-0.70	0.481
9	Provision of varying learning activities	2.85	1.17	-2.52	0.012
10	Standard of lectures and presentation	2.82	0.97	-3.44	0.001
	Quality of teaching/learning process				
11	General teaching and assessment practices	3.21	0.97	4.06	<0.001
12	Academic programme quality	2.90	1.11	-1.64	0.100
13	Implementation of a university calendar	2.85	1.27	-2.21	0.027
14	Relevance of the courses	3.26	1.11	4.33	<0.001
	Quality of assessment practices				
15	Variety of assessment methods	3.18	0.91	3.71	<0.001
16	Group task/assessment	2.95	1.25	-0.68	0.492
17	Assessment clarity	3.59	1.04	10.4	<0.001
18	Promptness of feedback	2.76	1.14	-3.85	<0.001
19	Effectiveness of feedback mechanisms	2.72	0.95	3.46	<0.001

Table 5 indicates, the mean scores of students on ten (10) of the items (1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 13 18 and 19) are significantly below proposed average neutral score set (which had a value of 3). This implies generally the study participants were not satisfied with the issues carried by the items. However, the students' mean score on 6 of the items (5, 6, 11, 14, 15, and 17) are significantly above the hypothetical means score. This implies generally the study participants were satisfied with the issues carried by the items.

The satisfaction of students regarding their learning experiences is anchored on the content and the methodology with which the content is delivered. Both the content and the adopted teaching methodology ensure cognitive, affective and psychomotor development of the students.

Table 6: Students' satisfaction with quality of learning experiences gained during their studies

No.	Variables	Mean	SD	t-test	P-value
	Learning Competencies			T-test value = 3	
1	Practical skills	3.91	0.97	-1.66	<0.001
2	Critical thinking and reasoning skills	2.96	0.95	-0.73	0.462
3	Problem solving skills through research	2.89	0.96	-2.01	0.045
4	Subject matter knowledge	3.26	0.99	-4.91	<0.001
5	Oral and written communication skills	2.98	0.96	-0.45	0.653
6	Teamwork and collaboration skills	2.93	0.97	-1.38	0.167
7	Research skills and practices	2.91	1.03	-1.57	0.116
8	Overall preparation for a professional career	2.96	0.90	-0.72	0.474

The results in Table 6 above show that, the mean rankings of the students' perceptions regarding their satisfaction with all the acquired learning competences were not statistically higher than the hypothetical mean set at 3, except items numbered 1 and 4. These are essential indicators of the

quality of learning experiences gained by the students in the study institutions. This is because two of the three principal aims of Bloom's taxonomy of learning domains which include cognitive and psychomotor development are enhanced. However, though not statistically significant, the mean of the issues raised in item 6 (teamwork and collaboration skills) is lower than the hypothetical mean. This is an indication that students' affective and social development could be hampered. This ought to be improved to ensure students are roundly developed. A learner is holistically transformed when the cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills of the learner is adequately developed [30]

Satisfaction of Students with Quality of Learning Resources and Support Services

The central element of all promulgated 21st century teaching and learning strategies hinges on adoption of student-centred approach by educators. Per this, teaching ought to be personalized, collaborative and project based. Thus, students then take control and direct of their own learning experiences as such do more personal studies instead of being over reliance on teachers.

Based on this, the satisfaction of the students with the quality of academic resources is very essential. Logically, the more students are comfortable with teaching and learning facilities, the more they are encouraged to learn on their own and the better they become as students.

Table 7: Student Satisfaction Quality of Learning Support Services

No.	Variables	Hypothetical t-test value=3			
		Mean	SD	t-test	P-value
	Resources				
1	Library resources	3.5	1	9.2	<0.001
2	ICT facilities	3.2	1.2	3.8	<0.001
3	Laboratories	2.9	1.1	-1	0.328
4	student recreational facilities	2.7	1.1	-4.7	<0.001
5	Counseling services	3.1	1.1	2.2	<0.029
6	Classroom space	3.5	1	10.3	<0.001
7	Classroom furniture layout	3.6	1.1	9.7	<0.001

The mean rankings of the students' perceptions regarding their satisfaction with quality of learning resources and support services were statistically higher than the hypothetical mean except item 3 and 4, which is an indication that the students were generally satisfied with the issues raised. Though the students expressed displeasure regarding the state and provision of laboratories, their displeasure is not significant. However, the students recorded a mean score that is statistically lower than the hypothetical mean (3) as seen in item 4. Obviously, this indicates the students are not happy with the recreational facilities in the selected institution.

5. Conclusion

Higher education managers who emphasize quality practices and students' involvement in IQA related issues end up in improving students' experiences and general perception concerning quality which will lead to the gaining of quality culture. The study revealed that, the systems and

mechanisms put in place do not adequately involve students in IQA related issues. Key factors that affect students' experiences of IQA practices are their academic level and programme offered. Therefore, it is impartial to conclude that the level of seriousness put up to ensure quality varies significantly among departments and academic levels. However, uniformity in quality practices which results in quality culture can be achieved if data on students' experiences are regularly taken and remedial strategies are taken.

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