

Managing Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Case of the University of Energy and Natural Resources, Ghana

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Abstract

The paper discusses quality assurance in the University of Energy and Natural Resources in Ghana. The University is a public funded institution established by an act of parliament; Act 830, 2011. As a newly established public funded University, quality assurance plays a central role in satisfying the requirements of stakeholders on the supply and demand sides of higher education, most importantly the regulatory environment- National Accreditation Board and the National Council for Tertiary Education. The paper discusses how the University manages quality assurance in its operations to bring about continuous improvement in teaching and learning. The paper discusses quality assurance as managed in the University- the successes, challenges and the way forward. The paper discusses some challenges that need critical intervention in the management of quality assurance in the University. These include the scenario where some staff have little understanding of quality assurance issues. Some staff also perceive quality assurance as a tool for victimising staff who fall short of quality standards. The issues discussed are very insightful partly because they come from experiences gathered in the design and implementation of quality assurance structures in a newly established university setting. The experiences shared in this paper would be very helpful to other newly established universities in the management of quality assurance. The paper recommends that the Management of the University needs to sensitise staff on quality assurance as a mandatory accreditation requirement and a tool for continuously enhancing quality standards.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Higher education, accreditation, teaching and learning, Ghana

1.0 Introduction

Quality assurance within the higher education sector has generated a lot of debate among stakeholders of higher education over the past decade and would be a more topical issue in the decade ahead. This is partly as a result of the fact that graduates from higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected by the stakeholders of higher education to be of the finest quality to be able to fit into any environment both in graduates' home countries and internationally.

In the view of Yankson (2013:2), the higher education sector “is regarded in some circles as the final processing stage of the graduate for the market”. This presupposes that adequate quality assurance mechanisms need to be designed and implemented by higher education institutions to assure students, government, parents, employers and regulators of higher education that graduates are adequately trained to meet manpower requirements.

Consequently, higher education institutions have strived to effectively manage quality assurance in their day-to-day management activities. Universities for example, have had to provide students quality academic programmes in addition to providing adequate facilities to bring about a holistic teaching and learning environment (World Bank, 1994). This is because students and parents would not achieve the expected returns on their investments when the learning environment is bedevilled with numerous deficiencies.

To effectively design and manage quality assurance in the higher education sector in Ghana, therefore, it is mandatory for all higher education institutions to set up quality assurance units/departments to spearhead quality assurance issues. As a result of the important role of quality assurance to enhancing the student learning experience in the Ghanaian higher education sector the regulators of higher education such as the National Accreditation Board (NAB) and the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) have consistently and systematically treated quality assurance as paramount. Subsequently, the University of Energy and Natural Resources has designed and managed quality assurance structures to make sure that good quality assurance practices are embedded in all the facets of its operations.

This paper discusses developments that confront the University of Energy and Natural Resources' Authorities in managing quality assurance processes and procedures. The paper synthesises a myriad of issues that face the University in the design and management of quality assurance structures to bring about continuous improvement in teaching and learning and makes policy recommendations for further improvement.

1.1 Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The definition of quality in higher education is nuanced-connoting several meanings. Materu (2007) observes that the term ‘quality’ in the context of higher education defies a precise definition. This is mostly due to the fact

that HEIs have broad autonomy to decide on their own visions and missions. This, notwithstanding, quality is generally regarded as ‘fitness for purpose’ (Hayward, 2006). That is, the ability to deliver outputs that satisfy the purpose for which something is instituted. In the context of higher education, fitness for purpose stands for the ability of an institution to train graduates to satisfy the needs for which a higher education institution was established. This, however, may differ among HEIs depending on the vision and mission and the expected outcomes from programmes.

Quality assurance in HEIs is a deliberate and systematic process whereby institutions constantly monitor teaching, learning, governance and all other factors that impinge the smooth running of the institution. The continuous nature of the process brings out the concept of ‘assurance’. That is, all stakeholders become assured that the purposes for which HEIs were established are met.

Quality assurance plays a prominent role in shaping the higher education terrain all over the world, especially in developing countries. Darwin and Lewis (2005) argue that the world has become more globalised with fast growing numbers in private higher education institutions coupled with increasing student enrolment.

This, consequently, makes quality assurance processes (e.g. institutional and programme accreditation, appropriate teaching and learning environment, accountability and assessment, etc.) assume a higher degree of relevance to stakeholders of higher education as higher education institutions go through rapid and dramatic changes. That is, the need for higher education institutions to adequately and effectively manage quality assurance processes has become more relevant than ever anticipated.

1.2 Quality Assurance in the University of Energy and Natural Resources

The University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR) is a Public funded University established by an Act of Parliament (Act 830) in 2011. The vision of UENR is to become a world class institution for generating, advancing and applying knowledge in the energy and natural resource sciences. The University is located in Sunyani, the Capital City of the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana.

The University’s mission is to promote the development of human resources and skills required to solve critical energy and natural resources challenges of society and undertake interdisciplinary academic, research and outreach programmes in engineering, science, economics and environmental policy. The University started in 2012 and has as at October 2014 admitted close to 2000 students pursuing various programmes of study.

Considering the critical role of quality assurance processes in the success of higher education, the University, right from the first year of inception, set up the Quality Assurance (QA) and Planning Unit (QAPU) to liaise with the various stakeholders of the University regarding the management of quality assurance. This was necessitated on the one hand by the fact that quality assurance has become one of the most important considerations for higher education institutions all over the world, especially for ‘infant’ ones such as the University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR) in Ghana. On the other hand, setting up a quality assurance unit is a requirement of regulators. The assumptions of the University in developing quality assurance mechanisms are similar to those of Hayward (2006) that throughout the world, the design and effective use of quality assurance mechanisms is a prerequisite for higher education development.

The design and utilisation of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions also stems from the fact that there are serious challenges of increasing numbers of prospective students coupled with unprecedented high number of applicants seeking admission into tertiary education institutions and the stagnant or plummeting investments in education by the major stakeholder - the government (World Bank, 1994). These challenges raise numerous questions that at times come with fewer answers. The University has strived to find adequate answers to these questions:

- i. How do we discover quality?
- ii. What is the quality of our academic programmes?
- iii. How do we meet stakeholder expectations?
- iv. How do we ensure accountability and quality assurance in all our operations?; and
- v. How do we close the quality gap?

To fully find answers to these and many other myriad of questions, the Management of UENR established a functional quality assurance and planning unit to provide adequate direction in the management of quality assurance processes and procedures in the University. The main objective of the unit is to satisfy all stakeholders in the manner that the services provided by the University across teaching, learning, research and service/extension are of the highest quality possible. This is operationalised through the demonstration that standards of awards in the University are appropriate and that the resources to meet the requirements of the academic infrastructure and other external benchmarks are of acceptable quality.

1.3 Setting up the Quality Assurance and Planning Unit at UENR: The Processes

The processes of establishing quality assurance mechanisms in higher education need extensive consultation and consensus building among all the important stakeholders. The University of Energy and Natural Resources

started its quality assurance unit with this caveat in mind. That is, quality in the University rests within it, which calls for a strong institutional framework to function. The processes followed by the University are discussed as follows:

1.3.1 Discussion of concepts with the Vice-Chancellor and the Registrar

The success of quality assurance processes and procedures in every institution depends greatly on the authorities in charge of governance. The process of establishing a quality assurance unit at UENR was first taken up by the Vice-Chancellor, the Pro Vice-Chancellor and the Registrar. This stage of the process gave quality assurance a strong institutional backing right from the onset. At this stage, the Management discussed the urgent need for quality assurance to be institutionalised within all the facets of the University. The next stage was the constitution of an ad hoc committee to look into the merit of setting up the unit.

1.3.2 Constituting Ad hoc Committee on Quality Assurance and Planning Unit

The University system thrives on the committee system in keeping things running effectively and efficiently. The ad hoc committee prepared a framework for quality assurance in the University and gave recommendation on how quality assurance was going to be infused in the University's operations. The ad hoc committee served as a platform where different views of academic and administrative staff and students on the design and implementation of quality assurance structures were solicited and collated. Setting up of the ad hoc committee further gave the whole process the strong backing of the major stakeholders-students and staff.

This stage was critical because it involved a lot of consultation from some key stakeholders as to what processes were needed to set up a functional quality assurance system. At this stage, the size of the ad hoc committee plays a key role in the success of the committee's work. Experience from the process at UENR pointed to the fact that a large committee size somehow proved ineffective. A committee size of five (5) is recommended to be able to do a good job.

1.3.3 Inputs from Experts

The input of experts was very critical to the success of the setting up of a quality assurance unit in the University. As a newly established Public funded University, there was the need for extensive engagement with key experts in the field of quality assurance in industry and in the higher education sector. This helped in many ways because the successes and failures of other universities as a result of quality assurance lapses were learnt for improvement. This helped authorities in the formulation of a quality assurance policy to serve as the policy thrust of managing quality assurance in the University.

The success of tapping expert knowledge was facilitated by the use of various Information Communication Technologies, especially the exchange of ideas through electronic copies of documents. An input from experts is a critical stage in the process of setting up quality assurance systems because it helps stakeholders to blend rich ideas regarding how things need to be done. Knowing this, the University relied on expert knowledge for fine tuning its quality assurance framework.

1.3.4 Brainstorming with Deans and Heads of Departments

One of the important stages in the setting up of the quality assurance unit in the University was brainstorming among Deans of Schools and heads of departments. This stage made great impact as it enabled heads of departments to make suggestions on quality assurance processes and procedures and how they would impact the quality assurance journey of the University. This stage was considered critical because it allowed key stakeholders to make adequate input. This further ensured stakeholder ownership of the resultant processes. That is, effective brainstorming by stakeholders on quality assurance processes and procedures leads to strong ownership of quality assurance processes in an institution. This stage helped in the fine tuning of ideas in order to arrive at the best possible decisions on quality assurance processes and procedures.

1.4 What Worked Well

The process of setting up the quality assurance unit in the University was challenging. However, the right decisions ensured that a functional quality assurance unit was successfully set up to spearhead quality assurance processes in the University. The following worked well in setting up the quality assurance unit:

1.4.1 Management Support and Institutional Ownership

The setting up of the Quality Assurance (QA) Unit in the University required the leadership, ownership and initiative of the entire University Management. This helped UENR in making judgment of its current performance for future enhancement in the provision of services. This is because academic quality assurance goes far beyond processes or procedures, it is rather a mission that needs everyone's attention and support (students, academic and administrative staff) to understand and practice activities in keeping with quality standards in the University. This is very crucial because academic qualifications of the highest quality require fitness for purpose, effective management and employability of graduates, standardisation of procedures and innovative teaching, learning and community engagements to keep the University competitive and sustainable in this globalised education era, to fulfil the vision and mission of the University and to contribute to the development of the country.

1.4.2 Demonstrating the Relevance and Benefits of Quality Assurance to the University

Quality assurance in universities is to assure society that higher education standards are adequate and in an increasingly global market, that they are competitive internationally (Massaro, 2006; Yankson, 2013). Against this background, society has accepted the complete autonomy awarded to universities in return for their impassive service, hence, there has been a rising insistence and peremptory request for accountability. This informed the University management to introduce the quality assurance unit to provide a measure of accountability to stakeholders. This informed the University Management to infuse quality assurance procedures in its decision making cutting across all activities of the University. The Management of the University has, therefore, demonstrated its commitment in ensuring that all activities of the University meet quality assurance standards.

Again, management acknowledged that satisfying the various stakeholders while maintaining academic standards can only succeed if the quality assurance unit measures what is relevant to stakeholders in a manner that it can understand. On mandate, the unit was tasked to undertake evaluation, and to ensure that quality assurance in the University met international educational standards and outcomes. The unit is also tasked to develop specific protocols and procedures that would govern all core and support processes important in quality assurance activities and would allow the University to analyse its strengths and weakness and put interventions in place to enhance academic quality.

1.4.3 Seeking Inputs from Experts and Colleagues

In establishing the unit and preparing the Quality Assurance Policy Manual, a broader consultation was carried out by the Management of the University. Expertise knowledge from academic quality assurance professionals and academic planners played a major role in the entire process. This approach was found extremely effective in tapping into the unique perspectives from other universities, helping to unlock their ideas not only on the system and structure of the unit, but also on realistic practices. This enabled management to receive varied perceptions and suggestions which enabled them to identify, prioritise and appraise issues from lessons and good practices in other universities. Again, Management combined the sharing of insights with analysis and provided a catalyst for action that established the QA unit.

1.4.4 Informal Discussion with Members of University Boards/Committees

In the setting up and managing the QA unit, various University boards and academic committees were consulted through focused group discussions as well as other interactive platforms. This was key to gathering practical and actual evidence-based information for making decisions on how to institutionalise and manage quality assurance in the University. This also ensured ownership of the process and facilitated the smooth and efficient implementation of the roadmap that established the QA unit. The active participation of the University community was prioritised, considering the benefits it presented to the Management of the University. By utilising visual methods and analytical tools, all key committee members participated in the process, regardless of their status, experience or capabilities.

1.4.5 Remaining Focused to Critical Quality Assurance Issues

Finally, at the institutional level, resources should be reserved not just for the quality review process but also for implementing the policies and recommendations therein for the improvements to be effected instead of only for the assessment and review processes. This is guaranteed at UENR. At UENR, management had predicted that quality assurance was going to face many challenges in the coming years as student numbers increased with its attendant challenges.

There was the need, therefore, that teaching, research, knowledge transfer and services would become more linked to institutional advancement in general and quality assurance specifically. Meaningful possibilities to set standards and compare institutional performance to internationally agreed outcomes was made a priority so that quality assurance could be used by the University to avoid some of the challenges that befell some of the old universities.

Most importantly, UENR did not forget about the fact that the future of QA as a meaningful contributor to institutional improvement was dependent on the survival of the willingness of individuals to improve critical quality issues-academic staff, non-academic staff, study environment, teaching-learning materials, library services, research and relevance of qualifications.

1.5 Challenges

There were several challenges in the setting up of the QA Unit within the University. Three of them are elaborated below and how management handled these challenges are also discussed.

1.5.1 Not properly defining the goals and objectives of the Unit.

The primary objective of a QA unit is to ensure successful implementation of standards and policies in the University. While this is obvious, experience shows that most HEIs do not pursue this objective or follow it vigorously enough. Due to this, most QA units are established without a well-defined goal or objective. Therefore, the core functions of the QA unit at UENR were clearly set out within the organisational structure to

avoid the scenario where the goals of QA would be misinterpreted and not been achieved. The Management of the University clearly agreed on the goals of quality assurance and how the goals were going to be pursued within the overall quality assurance framework of the University.

1.5.2 Not properly defining a Quality Assurance Unit's responsibilities and staffing to meet these responsibilities.

Ensuring academic quality requires the QA unit to work with the University management to ensure that processes are defined in such a way that they will result in the success of the University. This perspective of a QA unit's responsibilities goes beyond defining the responsibilities of the QA unit to be just designing policies and conducting assessments. To properly define the roles and responsibilities of the QA unit at UENR, Management made sure that quality academic standards required QA staff to work more closely with Management. This meant that the QA unit was to take responsibility for the success of the quality control processes and procedures within the University.

Adequate experience is important. Management of UENR also envisaged that QA staff needed to understand the issues that were most important to promoting and maintaining academic quality (e.g. student involvement, governance, conflict management, etc.) and be able to define a process that will result in success. The QA unit was staffed with people who were considered competent to be able to carry out quality assurance processes successfully.

1.5.3 Assuming existing standards/processes are followed and are sufficient.

Inadequate checks and balances to ensure that appropriate quality assurance processes are followed were identified by Management to be a potential challenges to an effective QA unit in the University. Management, therefore, put adequate review processes in place to continuously build, maintain and enhance existing QA structures in the University. Management was with the view that without strong hands-on management or an independent review process, there was going to be little incentive to adopt new and pragmatic QA process. One of the most important roles of a QA unit at UENR was the practice of establishing a consistent process for the University and working with academic departments to adapt the process to their unique circumstances. This was envisaged by Management to put the QA unit in a position to transfer best practices developed by one department to the other.

1.6 Conclusion

In improving academic quality and promoting institutional advancement, quality assurance and academic planning is a critical success factor for all institutions, especially 'infant' universities such as UENR. Moreover, government legislation is increasingly making universities and colleges in Ghana more accountable for the quality and relevance of their degrees and diplomas. This has numerous implications for all institutions to effective put in place adequate measures to carry out the mandate of quality assurance. At UENR, the setting up of an effective QA unit that provides both checks and balances to the academic departments is responsible for ensuring that effective policies and quality processes are defined and followed to achieve consistently relevant and quality degrees and diplomas. Despite the numerous challenges, there are prospects for improved achievement in quality assurance coming from the angle that quality assurance has become an important aspect of university administration and the continuous emphasis of the regulators of tertiary institutions, especially government on the need for higher education institutions to design, maintain and enhance quality assurance processes and procedures in all tertiary education institutions.

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