

# ***Confronting the Challenges of the Quality Assurance Process in Private Higher Education: The Ghanaian Experience***

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**Abstract:** Quality assurance agencies in Sub-Saharan Anglophone Africa were established in the 1990s to ensure quality in higher education delivery by institutions providing access to qualified post-secondary students. Their establishment was also to ensure standardization among private higher education institutions. However, the implementation of this trajectory at country level has had its challenges. Using the theoretical framework of legitimacy, this qualitative study explores the challenges of the quality assurance process in Ghana and their implications for policy. Open-ended interviews were held with sixteen participants consisting of higher education specialists, administrators of private higher education institutions, retired faculty members of public higher education institutions and officials of the National Accreditation Board (NAB). Findings showed evidence of challenges of the quality assurance process such as conflicting requirements from the NAB and mentor institutions, duplication of activities, the perception that public higher education institutions were favoured over private ones, non-compliance of institutions to the time-frame given for programme and institutional accreditation and lack of regular communication about an institution's charter request. The study has noteworthy implications for developing further policies that will guide the accreditation process of private higher education institutions in Ghana and other Sub-Saharan African countries having comparable quality assurance challenges.

**Keywords:** quality assurance, private higher education, Ghana, legitimacy, National Accreditation Board.

## ***Introduction***

Enrollment in the higher education sector in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), increased exponentially in the 1990s as a result of population growth that impacted enrollment at the pre-tertiary level. From 1990 to 2012, the number of children enrolled in primary school in SSA almost tripled from 62 million to 149 million children (AAI, 2015). These population increases at the pre-tertiary level invariably impacted the subsequent access to higher education. Pressure was therefore placed on resources at the public higher education institutions in SSA in their ability to provide quality environments for learning (Atteh, 1996; Sawyerr, 2004).

Various Sub-Saharan African governments in this category could not shoulder the financial burden of providing highly subsidized higher education to all qualified post-secondary applicants (Atteh, 1996). The reasons for their inabilities included economic downturn of the 1980s that impacted most Sub-Saharan African countries' ability as higher education is considered as being much more capital intensive than primary education and requires ten times more of what is spent on secondary education (Assie-Lumumba, 2006). These factors triggered the growth of private providers of higher education and the subsequent establishment of quality assurance agencies by Anglophone SSA governments to enable regulation.

Further the establishment of quality assurance agencies was based on the notion that, unlike the public higher education institutions, the private sector did not already have the internal quality assurance mechanisms in place and may not abide by the required regulations. However, the establishment of quality assurance agencies in SSA have had challenges associated with the enforcement of regulations both at the level of accreditor as well as the institution seeking accreditation.

As a precursor to the challenge of providing access to higher education to the growing population in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) generally and Ghana in particular, funding decreased in absolute terms in the 1980s. Many Sub-Saharan African countries implemented the Structural Adjustment Program, Ghana included, to address among others the challenges of providing access to higher education. Part of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) conditions implemented in Ghana included currency devaluation and a focus on primary and

secondary education, at the expense of higher education (Assie-Lumumba, 2004; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). This was based on the notion that the rates of return for primary and secondary education were greater than returns to higher education (Psacharopoulos, 1985). The implementation of this policy impacted the ability of government to provide increased infrastructural facilities for its higher education institutions as primary school enrollments had grown by more than 50 percent (Atteh, 1996). Subsequently, there was an excess demand over supply in the provision of postsecondary education, be it at the level of the university, professional or training institutes. Ghana's higher education enrollment in 2008 was 6.2%, while SSA had a 6% growth rate. Globally, higher education enrollment stood at an average of 26%. When the global average is compared to that of Ghana, a great disparity is noted (AAI, 2015).

It is noteworthy to indicate that the SAP was engineered by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and it emphasized the privatization of public services, higher education included (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000; Mabizela, 2007; Sawyerr, 2004). The SAP prescription had its disadvantages since the implementing country's context was not taken into consideration.

Consequently, the deteriorating conditions in Ghana's higher education sector led to a major policy reformulation from 1986 to 1988 instituted by the University Rationalization Committee (URC). The URC proposed policies aimed at cost-sharing strategies, income-generating activities and cost reduction measures at the post-secondary level of education (Girdwood, 1999). To provide access to the growing secondary school graduates, the URC recommended that private higher education institutions (PHEIs) be allowed to operate and also regulated. A further recommendation was the establishment of the National Accreditation Board through the enactment of the PNDC Law 317, to accredit both public and private higher education institutions. A major objective of the accreditation board is to ensure quality (Effah, 2003; Girdwood, 1999; Levy, 2006; Okebukola, 2002). Subsequently, in 1993, the NAB was established to regulate both private and public institutions as well as their programmes.

The establishment of a quality assurance agency became necessary based on the notion that unlike the public higher education institutions, the private sector did not have the internal quality assurance

mechanisms in place and may not follow the required rules and norms. Mabizela (2007, p.5) indicates that regulation “has largely been a reaction to the surge of private institutions due to the increasing demand for access to higher education”.

Another salient factor that influenced the establishment of a quality assurance agency in Ghana is the recognition that higher education has a significant role to play in the development of a nation’s human capital thus fostering economic development (Materu, 2007). Quality human capital has been linked to the economic development of a nation, thus a valid and comprehensive quality assurance agency sets the stage for its production.

Since the establishment of a national quality assurance agency in Ghana, minimal research has explored or investigated challenges encountered both by the accreditor as well as the institution seeking accreditation (Manyaga, 2008; Okebukola, 2003; Shabani, 2013) in SSA generally and Ghana in particular. Thus, there is a dearth of studies focused on challenges of the quality assurance process by the accrediting agency as well as the institution seeking accreditation. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining challenges of the quality assurance process as encountered by the accreditor as well as the institution seeking accreditation by using Ghana as a case. The overarching question that this study attempts to address is: (1) “What are the challenges that encumber private higher education institutions during the quality assurance process?”

This study might be of relevance to developing countries in SSA having similar or comparable quality assurance challenges. It can also form the basis of further exploratory study on quality assurance in Anglophone countries in SSA given that their colonial histories are intertwined (Sawyer, 2004). This study may also generate knowledge for policymakers, stakeholders and development partners involved in higher education in SSA on how to minimize or eliminate the challenges of the quality assurance process in Ghana. The outcome of this study will also aid in the identification of the need for capacity enhancement and quality improvement among providers of private higher education. It is assumed that lessons learned from this research may also be enlightening for other developing countries having similar challenges in the accreditation of PHEIs.

The subsequent sections of this paper consist of a review of studies on quality assurance challenges, the concept of legitimacy in the context of quality assurance, followed by methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion.

## ***Review of Literature***

To frame this current study, a number of important concepts are noted in the literature review. First, there will be an overview of quality assurance in higher education, followed by research on challenges associated with the quality assurance process especially in SSA. This section will also examine the concept of legitimacy as applicable to quality assurance, and constitute the study's theoretical framework.

Quality assurance in higher education is defined as “a planned and systematic review process of an institution or programme to determine whether or not acceptable standards of education, scholarship, and infrastructure are being met, maintained and enhanced” (Materu, 2007, p.3). It is also considered as licensing and accreditation prerequisites that an educational institution has to undergo (Levy, 2007). Invariably, higher education institutions that do not undergo this review process are not accorded the necessary recognition.

The term ‘accreditation’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘quality assurance.’ However, quality assurance is assumed to have a broader framework and is defined by Gaither (1998, p.3) as

“(...) the policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that the quality of education and scholarship (including research) is being maintained and enhanced (...) . It requires actions internal to the institution, but may also involve actions of an external body or bodies”.

The definitions above indicate quality control mechanisms that higher education institutions need to put in place to qualify them to be accepted as legitimate.

Fielden and Varghese (2009) indicate the primary need for regulation in private higher education to be protection of the consumer, especially the first generation student, who may not have any social network to draw upon to determine which higher education institution

is legitimate. Quality assurance is also required to foster accountability to government, students, employers, professions and colleagues.

Research indicates that higher education institutions must have certain minimal requirements in order to qualify for either institutional or programme accreditation (Association of African Universities, 2007; Alderman & Brown, 2005; Effah, 2003; Manyaga, 2008; Okebukola, 2002). These requirements include a self-study document prepared by the institution followed by panel visits from the quality assurance organization. Recommendations made by the accrediting institution are benchmarked against its standards.

The growth in private providers of higher education in SSA generally, and in Ghana particularly, has had its accompanying challenges. Research on challenges of the quality assurance process is minimal generally in SSA and particularly in Ghana thus necessitating this case study.

The Association of African Universities (2007) reiterates that private providers of higher education became involved in many Sub-Saharan African countries when national governments were not able to absorb the increasing demands for access to higher education institutions and its consequent regulation.

Research indicates quality assurance processes that higher education institutions in developing countries undergo as being fraught with several challenges. For the institution seeking accreditation, challenges include inadequate funding to support the preparatory phase of the accreditation process, non-compliance with basic standards, insufficient human resource, limited capacity building and minimal participation of administrative staff (Manyaga, 2008; Okebukola, 2002). According to Giesecke (2006: 13) the common claims about PHEIs include the belief that its students are

“thought to be inferior in preparation and performance; instructional programmes are often considered weak and too focused on the marketplace; library and laboratory resources are virtually non-existent; the vast majority of faculty members (...) do not engage in scholarly research in their fields of inquiry.”

On the part of the accrediting body, challenges of developing countries include inadequate staff to provide long-term guidance to higher education institutions and assist them qualify for accreditation. Other challenges include the inability of the accrediting agency to

effectively monitor the already accredited institutions as well as the unapproved ones that continue to offer academic programmes to the public (Manyaga, 2008; Okebukola, 2002). Shabani (2013: 2), notes that even though over sixty percent of the quality assurance agencies in SSA were established in the last decade, most of them “still lack the capacity needed to implement their mandates effectively.”

Globalization presents a challenge to quality assurance agencies in developing countries since some of them are not adequately resourced and thus do not have the capacity to deal with institutions crossing borders and establishing branch campuses (Blackmur, 2007; AAU, 2007). Blackmur (2007) examined issues in higher education quality assurance and noted accreditation of institutions crossing borders to another country as a challenge especially for developing countries. This is because some host nations may have minimal or no accreditation regulations guiding countries exporting academic programmes to a receiving country.

Moreover, quality assurance agencies in Sub-Saharan African countries require salient resources to enable them to assiduously accredit higher education institutions providing distance education effectively. This is because distance education presents varied challenges for the quality assurance agencies in SSA. Some of them include the maintenance of standards in distance learning and ensuring adequacy of resources (Harris & Gibson, 2006). The quality of a distance education programme is also at stake if profit becomes the main motivating factor (Maritim, 2009).

Research further indicates that in both developing and developed countries, it is not clear whom the accrediting body is accountable towards. However, there have been instances where accreditation issues have been taken to the courts to be resolved. There is also the challenge of the accreditation process being subject to manipulation and abuse as there is no watchdog guiding the accrediting agency (Alderman & Brown, 2005; Blackmur, 2007).

Quality assurance agencies act as regulators and confer legitimacy to higher education institutions that assures and convinces the consumer. Suspitsin and Suspitsyna (2007) studied the strategies employed by Russian private higher education organizations to maintain legitimacy with state actors. Their qualitative study was based on interviews and document analysis. The outcome of the study

indicated that higher education institutions in Russia employed the themes of conformity and manipulation among others to maintain their legitimacy. On the other hand, accredited institutions easily attracted and retained students than non-accredited institutions, suggesting the benefit of obtaining accreditation. Importantly, Kinser (2007: 272) also indicates that “private higher education often relies on accreditation or recognition from a public entity in order to grant degrees”.

Wilkins and Jeroen (2012) explored how ranking trends explained the historical development of higher education. The study indicated that apart from rankings, considered as normative framework, higher education institutions employed the regulative framework (accreditation). Moreover, there were links between the rankings and accreditation as students were most likely to attend the ones that are externally accredited. Giesecke (2006) explored the benefits of accreditation by a quality assurance agency of new PHEIs in Central and Eastern Europe (Poland and Hungary). In Poland the number of students enrolled in a higher education institution indicates legitimacy. Thus high student enrollment indicates that it is a legitimate place for students to pursue an academic education. In Hungary, a private higher education institution is accepted as legitimate if it is accredited by a state quality assurance agency. This study affirmed the concept of legitimacy as conferred by a quality assurance agency and did not explore other constructs such as challenges that the institutions encounter. Giesecke's (2006) study is indicative of the value of accreditation as a regulatory framework, and also suggests that accreditation may be important in some instances and in others it may not be that essential.

By application, research suggests that PHEIs of any kind have to comply with quality assurance regulations of the National Accreditation Board of Ghana in order to be considered legitimate by the state and the society.

Research reviewed indicates that there are no studies that particularly examine the challenges of the quality assurance process in a developing country like Ghana. This qualitative study aims to fill this gap by exploring the challenges of the quality assurance process instituted by Ghana's National Accreditation Board through the application of the legitimacy framework.



## ***Theoretical Framework***

Legitimacy is of utmost importance to any higher educational institution that wants to be recognized. According to Scott (1987), organizations are influenced by their locational environment through conformity or manipulation. Therefore, the environment plays a significant role in the formulation of the objectives of an institution. Conformity is exhibited for example, when a higher education institution abides by regulations established by the quality assurance agency such as having the requisite qualified staff, physical and human resources and the establishment of an internal system of evaluation. Including these earlier enumerated factors set the tone that provides for quality higher education. This study focuses on the concept of legitimacy as its theoretical framework.

Suchman (1995: 574) defines legitimacy as: “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” In this definition, Suchman emphasizes that a characteristic of legitimacy is to enable an organization to achieve its goals. Invariably, the ultimate objective that propels the quality assurance processes that PHEIs undergo is the achievement of legitimacy that are impacted by challenges. Scott (2008) asserts that organizations have to conform to the rules and belief systems dominant in the environment in order to attain legitimacy. He suggests that the institutional life of a higher education institution may consist of competitors, students and regulatory agencies.

Research also indicates that the emergence of PHEIs in most countries, SSA included, was a ‘surprise’ and was started in an atmosphere of ‘delayed state regulation’ (Levy, 2006; Slancheva & Levy, 2007). Subsequently, countries enacted regulations, after the moment of ‘surprise’ to regulate and legitimize the quality of PHEIs through various modalities such as accreditation.

Furthermore, Rusch and Wibur (2007: 98) consider higher education accreditation as being the procedures that institutions undergo to achieve legitimacy through “highly scripted procedures”. They further indicate that accreditation enables a higher education institution to attain status while emulating a varied set of standards and values. Quality assurance procedures could therefore be interpreted as

scripted processes that institutions have to undergo to obtain recognition. The review process is a periodic event that either reaffirms the status of a higher education institution or enables it to attain legitimacy. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) suggest that institutions must conform to 'scripts' in order to obtain legitimacy.

The challenges to legitimacy include "lack of tradition, social standing, established support, and secure sustenance" (Slancheva & Levy, 2007: 6). However, through accreditation, PHEIs are able to attain legitimacy once they pass the state requirements. Legitimacy is of utmost importance to any higher education institution that wants to be recognized. Salanick and Pfeffer (1978: 194) describes legitimacy as being more readily noticed when it "is absent than when it is present."

The processes that a higher education institution undergoes in the legitimization process will be dictated by whether it wants to maintain, gain or repair legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). However, to gain legitimacy, higher education institutions must become isomorphic and have certain identifiable 'characteristics' that can be accorded the requisite recognition (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The legitimacy concept from Suchman's (1995) perspective provides the theoretical framework for this study as it attempts to make sense of the challenges confronting the quality assurance process.

## ***Methodology***

The methodology employed in this research is the case study, which is used to explore in-depth the associated legitimacy challenges arising from the growth of private providers of higher education, (Ishengoma, 2007; Mabizela, 2007; Otieno, 2007; and Sawyerr, 2004). The analysis of the Ghanaian case will assist in addressing the phenomenon of legitimacy challenges in the larger framework of SSA. Yin (2009) indicates that the case study enhances knowledge acquisition, enables the researcher to observe events directly and to interview people having roles to play in the study. Similarly, Stake (1995) notes that a case study examines in-depth an event, programme or activity within a certain time period. This section examines participants, data collected and analysis.

## ***Participants***

According to Rubin and Rubin (2005) participants chosen must be knowledgeable about the research problem as this gives credibility. Thus this study purposely selected and interviewed participants who were well informed about the problem, consisting of administrators and faculty members from seven PHEIs (five university colleges and two private chartered universities) representing two institutional categories in Ghana. This was in addition to nine other participants that were also purposely selected. These nine participants consisted of three NAB officials (consisting of the Deputy Executive Secretary, one person from the quality assurance committee and another from the accreditation committee), two retired faculty members and a retired rector of public higher education institutions, a senior education specialist for the African Region, a higher education specialist and former member of UNESCO Commission on Diploma Mills, and a consultant and senior higher education specialist for the World Bank. Altogether, the total number of participants for the study was 16. According to Patton (1990) purposive sampling indicates attributes of particular sub-groups and encourages comparisons.

The researcher's justification for selecting these varied participants is based on the belief that they will provide significant insights into the quality assurance process and challenges encountered in a developing country like Ghana.

## ***Data Collection***

The participants were initially contacted through email, followed by Skype, telephone and face-to-face interviews, as the situation demanded. An unstructured open-ended interview protocol served as a guide for the data collection. The researcher conducted all interviews in person and permission was sought from the participants to audio record. Recording of the interviewees offered an accurate data capture (Morgan & Guevara, 2008). In order to maintain confidentiality, actual institutional and participant names were not included in the study. The duration of each interview ranged from 40 minutes to about one hour and fifteen minutes.

Copies of the interview protocols, which were informed by the research question guiding the study, were given to the participants prior to the date of the interview. The interview protocol for administrators and faculty members focused primarily on quality assurance challenges encountered during and after the process of accreditation. The interview protocol for the NAB officials focused on capacity building for PHEIs, affiliation, accreditation timeframe and challenges encountered. The higher education specialists and retired faculty were interviewed about the quality assurance process, the accreditation structure in Ghana and challenges of the quality assurance process. At the end of each interview protocol, interviewees were given the opportunity to express their thoughts on any related relevant issues that were not addressed during the interview.

### ***Data Analysis***

This study applied content analysis of the primary data in addition to using both the inductive and deductive approaches. According to Lauri and Kyngas (2005) the inductive approach is used when 'there are no previous studies' or when previous research is minimal. On the other hand the deductive method is applied when a theory is to be tested and analysis is based on previous knowledge (Boyartis, 1998; Kyngas & Vanhanen, 1999).

### ***Interview Analysis***

Data analyses included transcription of interviews, preparing memos, coding data, and summaries (Maxwell, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The researcher examined themes that emerged from the interviews both deductively and inductively, and further looked for linkages and patterns among themes. The coding was done manually by reading through the interview transcripts several times to look for repeating ideas that were relevant to the research questions. Each interview transcript was read at least three times to acquaint the researcher with the themes that would emerge from the coding process. The first level of the coding process began with open coding which enabled the

researcher to accurately determine which thematic category to apply to the transcripts. The codes were applied to sentences/statements in the interview transcripts and themes were generated from repeating ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

During the second phase of the coding process, similar categories and themes were aggregated together based on the research questions of the study. A second coder also reviewed the data and identified major categories and themes which helped to determine the accuracy of the identified categories and themes. Finally, a draft of the interview transcript was sent to participants as a form of member check to authenticate the accuracy of the emerging themes. The analyzed data resulted in the identification of the following themes including; *vague charter requirements, adjunct faculty, multiple admissions, interference from proprietors and accreditation time frame.*

The researcher addressed credibility of the analyzed data by triangulating information obtained from administrators/faculty members of PHEIs with data obtained from retired faculty/rector of public higher education institutions and higher education specialists (Jehn & Jonsen, 2010).

The researcher also addressed the issue of validity by being cognizant of threats. Maxwell (2005: 106) defines validity as a “straightforward, commonsense way to refer to the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, and other sort of account”. Two threats to validity in research are noted as the bias of the researcher, and the impact on interviewees, known as “reactivity.” Occasionally when the researcher affects what the interviewee says, that could impact validity (Maxwell, 2005). Importantly, the researcher was cautious about “reactivity” in data obtained from interviewees.

## Results

This section examines the themes generated from the data analyzed coming from the 16 participants that are delineated based on participant group category. The higher education specialists and retired faculty members/rector constitute the first group of participants to be discussed.

## ***Higher Education Specialists and Retired Faculty Members/Rector***

Two major themes became apparent from the interview analysis of higher education specialists and retired faculty members/rector. These were the challenges of (a) clarification of vague charter requirements, and (b) dependence on adjunct faculty.

### *Clarification of Vague Charter Requirements*

Interview data revealed that there were no definite procedures for PHEIs wishing to apply for charter and being autonomous. Charter is the process of granting autonomy to an institution from its mentor in order to enable it to operate independently and award its own degrees. According to the NAB, the charter process includes operating under a mentor for at least 10 years, having a governance structure, evaluation of teaching quality of academic staff, assessment of research and publication of applicant institutions and other factors that the NAB would determine as appropriate (Accreditation News, 2018). However, one PHEI that had earlier applied for charter on the assumption that it had fulfilled all the stipulated requirements was initially denied. According to one higher education specialist participant, issues of inadequate scholarly research and publications were used by the NAB to initially deny the charter request. However, the NAB did not officially inform them and was silent about the reasons for denial. This was confirmed by a participant (an administrator) interviewed at this PHEI who indicated that the NAB was not dealing with them in a 'quality way'. Generally, scant publication by faculty members is associated with inadequate time to research and publish as a result of high teaching loads. Usually, adjunct faculty members at most PHEIs are mainly focused on teaching and service provision and not research. Eventually, this PHEI was awarded its charter by the president of Ghana in June 2018 ([www.nab.gov.gh](http://www.nab.gov.gh)).

### *Dependence on Adjunct Faculty*

Most PHEIs in Ghana depend heavily on adjunct faculty members because many of them do not have enough core faculty members and

rely on those in the public higher education institutions or retired faculty members to supplement their academic staff. Therefore, the increase in private providers has further emphasized the need for an increase in qualified academic staff (Altbach, 2005; Fried, Glass & Baumgartl, 2007). Though Ghana is noted to have an annual need of 1000 new faculty members for its public higher education sector, each institution is able to hire on average about 20-30 academics a year to replace retiring professors (Hayward & Ncayiyana, 2014). As indicated earlier, adjunct faculty in Ghana do not focus much on research, as emphasis is placed more on teaching and service. And this has negatively impacted the overall academic output from PHEIs in SSA (Varghese, 2004; Mugenda, 2009). A higher education specialist and former member on UNESCO Commission on Diploma Mills stated:

*You have faculty who are spread very thin at the private institutions because you've got fewer full-time people, and fewer with PhD coaching a lot of 'moonlighters'.... and that is a time bomb in the making there. (KN, Specialist).*

Private higher education institutions have the challenge of recruiting core faculty to reduce their dependence on adjunct faculty, as this will increase research output in the long run.

### ***NAB Officials***

The NAB of Ghana represents the regulatory frame of the quality assurance process that higher education institutions have to abide by. It also signifies the authority of the state in enforcing regulations guiding the quality assurance process and ensuring that higher education institutions in Ghana remain legitimate. Data analyzed from interviews with three officials of Ghana's National Accreditation Board identified a number of challenges that impacted legitimacy as follows: (a) Shortage of qualified academic staff employed at PHEIs, (b) Non-compliance of private institutions to the time-frame given to them for programme and institutional accreditation, and (c) A level of dishonesty on the part the institution seeking accreditation.

### *Shortage of Qualified Academic Staff*

The shortage of qualified academic staff at PHEIs in Ghana is noted by NAB officials as one of the major challenges impacting staffing strengths at PHEIs. A member of the accreditation team stated:

*There is the bigger issue of dearth of faculty. There aren't enough people in the system. The institutions are expanding and we are not expanding the pool of lecturers [faculty members] or PhD holders. It is a national problem.* (RA, Accreditation Committee)

The preceding quote affirms shortage of qualified faculty members in Ghana in particular and it dovetails into a similar assertion by higher education specialist participants who also indicated shortage of academic faculty as a challenge for PHEIs and the quality assurance process. However, this is a bigger issue in SSA as a whole (Hayward & Ncayiyana, 2015). Research indicates some of the compelling challenges to the quality assurance process in Sub-Saharan Africa include inadequate human resource and minimal participation of the administrative staff (Manyaga, 2008; Okebukola, 2002).

### *Non-Compliance of Institutions to Given Time-Frames*

Data obtained from interview analysis indicates that some PHEIs do not comply with the time frame given to them for programme and institutional accreditation. An NAB official, who is a member of the accreditation committee lamented:

*Some (institutions) may want to start a programme in September, but will delay and bring the application in June of the same year. And when we are not flexible about it then they begin to complain. So the Board implemented a policy that in applying for a new programme/new institution, apply at least 12 months to the envisaged start date. But if it is a programme or institutional reaccreditation, apply six months to the expiry date. Even this, they [private higher education institutions] have not been adhering to.* (RA, Accreditation Committee)

The earlier quote indicates the delay by the PHEIs in submitting their application for programme and institutional accreditation. This is one salient challenge that the NAB has to grapple with on a regular basis. Even after delaying in the submission of their applications, they



will rather pressure the NAB to fast track their application even though applicants did not adhere to the specified timeframe.

### *Dishonesty on the Part of Some Accrediting Seeking PHEIs*

Data obtained indicates dishonesty on the part of some PHEIs seeking accreditation. A participant from the quality assurance committee stated:

*One of the biggest challenges is being truthful to the system... Sometimes when an institution wants accreditation, they go to all lengths to get the CVs [resumes] of various qualified professors to convince us to give them accreditation. Once you give them accreditation, you go to the ground and you don't see the professors. (QF, Quality Assurance Committee)*

This statement has shown that some PHEIs could be very manipulative and would employ all kinds of methods just to gain accreditation and legitimacy from the NAB. Currently, the NAB does not have the mechanism to track PHEIs involved in this anomaly successfully. However, the establishment of an accreditation management information systems will enable the NAB verify information of faculty members and eliminate this irregularity that negates the legitimacy of PHEIs.

### ***Faculty Members and Administrators of Private Higher Education Institutions***

Data analyzed from interviews with faculty members and administrators of five private university colleges and two private chartered institutions identified five themes associated with legitimacy challenges.

The identified themes were: (a) Conflicting requirements from NAB and mentoring institutions, (b) Lack of regular and formal communication about an institution's request for charter, and (c) Unequal treatment of private university colleges in comparison with the public universities, and

*(d) Conflicting Requirements from NAB and Mentoring (Supervising) Institutions*

Participants revealed that during programme or institutional accreditation, recommendations given by the NAB and the mentoring (supervising) institution sometimes conflict. Therefore the private institution seeking accreditation is confused as to whose recommendation should supersede the other and this presents a challenge to them. A participant at a private university college stated:

*The challenge we had, has to do with the accreditation process, you know we are affiliated to Legon [University of Ghana]... the NAB will come and assess, give their comments, University of Ghana will come and assess, give their comments and sometimes you will find that their comments are conflicting. So you are at a loss as to which way to go.... University of Ghana is to give certificates to your products so if you are not going by their standards they are not issuing our certificates. And if you don't go by the NAB recommendations, they are going to withdraw your accreditation. So you are at a loss as to which one should take precedence. And that has been a major challenge we are facing. (PF, Faculty Member)*

When this participant was probed further to indicate how such conflicting situations were dealt with, he noted that the institution had to liaise with both parties until a consensus was reached. This frustrating and challenging situation impacts negatively and delays the process of a private provider seeking recognition and legitimacy.

*(e) Lack of Regular and Formal Communication About an Institution's Request for Charter*

Participants indicated the lack of regular and formal communication between private university colleges and the NAB about charter applications as a challenge to be addressed. Charter is defined by the NAB as an "assent by the President for a tertiary institution to award its own degrees, diplomas and certificates" (Accreditation News, 2018). As earlier noted, one participant indicated that her institution had officially applied for charter believing that they had fulfilled all the requirements after being in existence for 12 years. She lamented the lack of formal communication between the NAB and her institution about the charter application request and commented:

*They [NAB] are not dealing with us in a quality way. You would expect that they would at least write to us and acknowledge receipt. You would expect that after they (NAB) had their meeting ... that they would have written to us. (PV, Vice-Provost)*

Thus there is institutional dissatisfaction with NAB being in a position of authority and not providing adequate information to mentee institutions. Ashforth and Gibbs (1990: 182) observe that “both constituents and supporters are likely to prove most grudging when organizational technologies are uncertain or risky....” Notably, the feeling of uncertainty and dissatisfaction on the part of the charter seeking institution about the lack of regular communication from the NAB is a challenge that impacts the legitimacy of the institution.

### ***Unequal Treatment of Private University Colleges in Comparison with the Public Universities***

The majority of the participants complained that the NAB favored the public higher education institutions over the private institutions in their role as the overseeing accrediting body. They observed that the NAB is softer on the public universities in terms of accreditation and quality assurance requirements. A participant who is an administrator at a private university college explained:

*Sometimes I just feel that they are not painting all the universities in Ghana with the same brush. They are a little soft towards what I will term the main stream public universities. But when it comes to the private universities, they are very tough. In a way, you can understand them because these are universities that were set up just to augment the intakes and increase the level of education in Ghana... And they [NAB] need to make sure that they exercise that authoritative role on them to make sure they conform....When it comes to the public universities like the University of Ghana etc.... these are traditional universities that have been in existence for so many years and they assume that whatever they do is in line with their expectations. (RA, Administrator)*

Though the participant was of the perception that the NAB did not treat the private and the public institutions on equal basis, he advanced a reason for such stringent oversight by the NAB as being due to the fact that the PHEIs have not been in existence for too long. In addition, the

limited resources and facilities at the disposal of PHEIs when compared to that of public universities, may merit the unequal treatment from the NAB.

Invariably, the study found evidence that legitimacy procedures relating to quality assurance requirements as indicated by the NAB, influenced the activities of PHEIs and enabled conformity (El Hassan, 2013; Suchman, 1995; Suspitsin & Suspitsyna, 2007). However, the themes delineated on indicated challenges that institutions have to address in their bid to be recognized as legitimate.

## ***Discussion***

The data in this study indicates the challenges that both PHEIs and the accrediting institutions encounter during the quality assurance process, especially in the bid of accrediting seeking institutions to become legitimate in conformity to the requirements of the NAB.

Findings from this study revealed that PHEIs will want to maintain their legitimacy after gaining it from the NAB through conformity. In spite of the challenges encountered, PHEIs are still making efforts at maintaining their legitimacy. One outcome of this study indicates that information about charter requirements needed to be made more explicit by the NAB to PHEIs that want to become autonomous within the stipulated ten-year mandate. During interviews, participants stated that there was lack of communication between the NAB and PHEIs that want to be autonomous regarding additional unwritten requirements. The communication gap about additional charter requirements on the part of the NAB as a regulatory body creates uncertainty and vagueness and is also a challenge for the PHEI seeking charter.

Accreditation granted to PHEIs in response to conformity to quality assurance standards, indicates acceptability as well as the institution's compliance to beliefs, values and rules in the environment that it is located. This study found evidence that, generally, PHEIs in Ghana made the necessary efforts to comply with the requirements of the quality assurance process in order to gain accreditation and be recognized as legitimate. Failure to abide by the regulations will result in sanctions and thereby loss of recognition and legitimacy (Giesecke,

2006; Gonzalez, Montano & Hassall, 2009; Santana et al., 2010; Suspitsin & Suspitsyna, 2007; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012).

This study revealed a substantial dependence on adjunct faculty members by PHEIs. In view of the continual growth and expansion in PHEIs, there is the anticipation of an additional need for both academic and non-academic staff. This exposes the dearth of full-time faculty members as well as shortage of those having doctorates or research degrees available to teach (Fried, Glass & Baumgartl, 2007; Hayward & Ncayiyana, 2015) at PHEIs.

Findings further indicate that many of the PHEIs in Ghana rely on the public higher education institutions or retired faculty to address their staffing needs, thus further impacting the legitimization process. The increase in the number of private institutions has further deepened the need for qualified academic and non-academic staff. Findings further agree with the advocacy of Hayward and Ncayiyana (2014) about the need for a quality assurance process that pays particular attention to doctoral education and research. The authors further advocate that graduate education should take on a more regional role in West Africa as is the case in the country of South Africa where graduate students from countries outside the South African region pursuing either Master's or doctoral programmes pay highly discounted fees. The University of Ghana (in West Africa) also runs a similar venture where doctoral students in the African sub-region take part in a six-week programme and are trained in dissertation writing among others. This programme, called the Pan African Doctoral Academy, is offered twice a year and is highly subscribed ([www.ug.edu.gh](http://www.ug.edu.gh)). It is projected that an increase in the number of doctoral degree holders will impact the number of available full-time faculty for PHEIs and further enhance their capacity and legitimacy in Ghana.

The study also showed that some PHEIs were non-complaint to the time frame given to them for programme and institutional accreditation thus impacting the legitimacy process. For example the NAB had to give institutions extra time beyond the stipulated time for their programme and institutional accreditation renewal. This challenge of delays in institutional and programme accreditation affects the legitimacy of a PHEI as it is not able to maintain it on a continuous basis and thus has to lose it at a particular point and work to regain it again. This outcome could also be linked to the challenge associated with the lack of

competent administrative support staff to assist with accreditation documentation of the PHEIs (Manyaga, 2008; Okebukola, 2002).

Furthermore a surprising finding from the study was that some PHEIs seeking accreditation use the curriculum vitae of qualified professors to convince the NAB about their legitimacy. Once accreditation has been obtained, the faculty members presented during the accreditation process become non-existent on the college's list. This indicates the manipulative and dishonest nature of some PHEIs to gain legitimacy. Once this anomaly is detected, the institution's legitimacy is jeopardized, eventually losing it and the institution will have to work at regaining its legitimacy again (Suchman, 1995). It is suggested that the NAB develops a system that verifies and ensures that faculty members listed as staff of a private higher education are genuine and not put there purposely for accreditation purposes.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

This qualitative study focused on the challenges confronting the quality assurance process using the perspectives of international higher education specialists, retired faculty members/ rector, administrators and officials of the National Accreditation Board. However, a number of limitations of the study are noted.

First, the purposely selected sample of PHEIs is a minor exemplification of the available sample when the total number of institutions in Ghana is taken into consideration. For future research it could be informative to increase the number of selected institutions and juxtapose it against public higher education institutions in the country to explore the legitimacy challenges encountered. The proposed comparative study could indicate whether public higher education institutions also encounter similar challenges associated with private providers while adhering to the regulations of the National Accreditation Board.

Second, public higher education institutions in Ghana could be used to replicate this study to determine how they abide by the requirements of the NAB and whether they also encounter similar challenges during the quality assurance process and the impact on their legitimacy. This future research recommendation can guarantee that the

NAB is not favoring the public institutions over the private institutions by overlooking certain requirements.

## ***Conclusion***

Regulation and legitimacy are required during the quality assurance process to send the required signal to all stakeholders that PHEIs offering programmes have undergone the mandatory processes to qualify to be accredited. As a result of the continual growth of private higher education providers in a developing country like Ghana, it is imperative for the NAB to make the quality assurance process very welcoming to genuine actors so that challenges that confront the process can be minimized if not eliminated completely. Some of the challenges that were addressed in the study included conflicting requirements from both the NAB and mentor institution, shortage of academic staff, noncompliance to timeframe given for programme and institutional accreditation, and lack of regular communication about an institution's charter request. These challenges will require a holistic approach involving both the NAB and the PHEIs for lasting policy solutions to address them.

At the regional level, Africa has a number of sub-regional networks including the Association of African Universities (AAU) Quality Assurance Initiative, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) quality assurance framework. These sub-regional networks have the stated objective of ensuring the quality of higher education institutions in their jurisdictions (Okebukola & Shabani, 2007) through the formulation of policy guidelines to impact all countries especially those that do not have local quality assurance agencies.

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