Examining quality culture in the University of Professional Studies, Accra

Godwin Utuka*
University of Professional Studies, Accra, P. O Box LG-149, Accra, Ghana

*Corresponding Author
Godwin Utuka

Abstract: In recent years higher education institutions and governments in developing nations have followed their counterparts in developed countries in adopting quality assurance to enhance the quality of education provided. This according to Kotler (1985) is because the universities have seen the provision of higher education to become a product and have been driven by competition to examine the quality of their services, to redefine their product and to measure customer satisfaction in ways that are familiar to service marketing specialists. With the issuance of Presidential Charter to the University of Professional Studies in 2008 conferring on it the status of a fully-fledged public university in Ghana, the management realized that the institution's long- term survival depends on how good its services are and that quality sets one university apart from the rest. Consequently various quality assurance policies, initiatives and action lines were developed to improve the quality of education and other services it provides such that the primary responsibility of quality assurance lies with the institution itself. After years of implementing these initiatives, the paper felt that the time had come to take a moment to analyse the progress or impact these initiatives have had on the quality of education provided by the University

Keywords: Quality Assurance, institution, programme.

INTRODUCTION

Quality Assurance (QA) issues have in recent times, become prominent in higher education institutions (HEIs) globally in the wake of the need for accountability and value for money. The quest for quality is attributed to a number of changing phenomena [1-4]. HEIs are driven to undertake major reforms in their structures and activities by a range of forces, which mostly come from globalization, accountability, supply and demand issues, competition, and technology. Mohhamedhai [5] noted that the commoditization, privatization, massification and new modes of delivery of higher education are believed to have contributed to lowering standards and consequently affecting quality of higher education globally.

Higher education in Ghana – just like elsewhere in the world – has witnessed great expansion over the last decade. This is due to an increased public investment, establishment of public higher education institutions and socio-economic reforms allowing public-private partnership in higher education investment, which has led to a proliferation of higher education providers through the establishment of private universities. The types of higher education have become more diverse and non- government institutions have appeared in big numbers, along with foreign universities or partnership programs with foreign universities. While this expansion has led to an increased access, the quality of the education provided by the existing and newly established higher education institutions has continued to raise serious concern. Also of concern is the need to ensure that higher education in Ghana measures up to acceptable international standards, embracing comparability and compatibility of curricula regionally as well as internationally. In recent years HEIs in Ghana have developed and adopted different approaches for the introduction of quality management in higher institutions like their counterparts in the developed nations. According to Akpovi [6] these universities have realized that their long-term survival depends on how good their services are and that quality sets one university apart from the rest. The University of Professional Studies being the newest public university in Ghana in its quest to enhance the quality of its programmes and meet international standards made several initiatives towards the formulation of institutional QA systems motivated by the desire to strengthen collaboration and cooperation in quality assurance among the various departments. After years of taking these initiatives, this paper seeks to examine the impact that these initiatives have had on the quality of education provided by the University.

Case Report

This paper aims specifically at examining the quality culture at the UPSA to determine the impact of the several QA initiatives undertaken by the University has on the quality of education provided. The data collection was based on a combination of methods. These methods were not discrete stages of data collection but I applied them concurrently. The main sources are: documents and literature relating to the institution's quality assurance systems and interviews staff who had worked with the university for at least five years. These staff are in the position to assess what the impact of the initiatives that had been taken has on the quality of education provided. The documents consulted

include government policy paper, policies, annual reports, reports from different committees, reports on the application of procedures, newsletters, brochures, and memos.

Brief History of the University of Professional Studies

The University of Professional Studies, Accra (UPSA) is the newest public institution that provides both academic and professional higher education in Ghana. The Institution was founded in1965 as a private institution and was taken over by government in 1978 by the Institute of Professional Studies Decree, 1978 (SMCD 200). It was subsequently established as a tertiary institution by the Institute of Professional Studies Act, (Act 566), 1999 with a mandate to provide tertiary and professional education. The Institute received a Presidential Charter in September 2008, conferring on it the status of a fully- fledged public university. In August 2012, the University of Professional Studies Act was passed by Parliament conferring on it the name University of Professional studies (UPS). The University serves about 10,000 students from the region and around the world. It offers a large number of bachelor's and a moderate number of master's degrees through four academic faculties. The University is currently the only public tertiary Institution in Ghana, with the mandate to offer both academic Degrees and the training for professional Programmes.

Attempts at quality assurance in UPSA

Quality assurance refers to review procedures undertaken by HEIs that are designed to safeguard academic standards, and promote learning opportunities of acceptable quality for students. Quality has become a matter of major importance for HEIs globally and managing the quality processes has equally become critically important for the educational managers. The transition/change in status of the UPSA presents it with new opportunities as well as challenges. The quality of education provided has been identified as one of the key factors which will allow the University to succeed in a global competition. In its quest to maintain high standards in higher education across Africa, and to repositioning itself as a global institution, one of the cardinal characteristics the University is improving is the internal quality assurance structures. The University developed internal structures and initiated various processes to improve the quality of education it provides comparable to other universities internationally.

Quality management systems (QMS)

The University has put in place internal quality management systems that are needed for effective self-regulation. A QMS is the organizational structure, responsibilities, processes, procedures and resources for implementing quality management. This includes basic management functions that determine and implement the organization's quality policy and objectives that are essential to the achievement of organizational objectives. Tovey [7] noted that best practice requires that the implementation of QA programmes be preceded by a strong commitment on the part of university leaders and managers to quality advancement. This principle puts the responsibility on top management to establish, manage and monitor their QA systems to provide high-quality education and services to meet the needs and expectations of their customers. This requires top management commitment and active involvement in order to ensure at all times the adequacy, effectiveness, suitability and efficiency of the system. According to BS EN ISO 9001:2008, the top management commitment and active involvement in the quality management system is very critical and this can be accomplished by:

- Defining and documenting a quality policy and quality objectives and ensuring that both the policy and objectives are understood and implemented by all employees at all levels;
- Ensuring that appropriate processes are implemented to fully satisfy customer needs and expectations and company objectives;
- Defining and documenting the responsibility, authority and interrelation of key personnel managing the quality systems;
- Providing adequate resources for implementing and maintaining the quality systems;
- Conducting scheduled management reviews of the quality systems to assess their continued suitability, adequacy, effectiveness and efficiency; and
- Deciding on actions for continual quality improvement
- These provisions provide the basis for examining the management involvement and commitment at UPSA for continuous enhancement.

Management Commitment to Quality

The governance structure for the University comprises the University's Governing Council, which is constituted by Government, the Academic Board cascading to other Statutory Committees including Deans of Schools, Faculties, Institutes and Heads of Department. Senior Members and the Unionized Staff are also involved in the governance by serving on various committees in the University. Section 4 (1) of the UPS Act, 2012) empowers the Council to ensure the implementation and achievement of the objectives of the University. As a result, the Council is at the apex of the governance structure. The Council ensures the effectiveness and efficiency of the University's operations; reliability of financial reporting; compliance with laws and regulations; and safeguarding its assets. The Act

gives power to the Council to appoint lecturers and other persons to academic and administrative positions and to oversee the internal organization of the University, including the establishment, variation and supervision of academic departments and faculties/ schools and Institutes. Students Representative Council is involved in the decision making processes of the University through its representation on various committees of the University. UPSA has complex management and organizational structures that are responsible for the management of the quality of education provided. Generally, the structure recognizes that the responsibility for quality of the institution lies at all levels of the structure and with every member of staff.

To demonstrate its commitment to the quality process, management initiated the following internal quality assurance structures and procedures that are needed for effective self-regulation.

Establishment of Quality assurance directorate (QAD)

Managing the quality assurance processes of an institution is the responsibility of the quality assurance department. The mission of a quality assurance department is to provide an effective and efficient internal quality assurance system and counsel for the operational units. Accordingly, Management of the University established a QAD to oversee the implementation and co-ordination of the institution-wide quality management system. The Directorate is tasked with the responsibility of managing and co-coordinating both the internal and external quality assurance activities and to ensure compliance with institutional policies and procedures. The Directorate is manned by well-defined and designated senior staff responsible for institution wide quality management and operates independently from the operational units and regularly performs quality review.

The experiences of the practices in a number of advanced nations imply that approaches to quality assurance in higher education can only work effectively provided some basic factors are put in place and are functioning properly. Some of these provisions that are in place in the University include the following:

International practices demand that higher institutions should document fully – and review periodically – their quality systems. It is recommended that internal quality management structures should be guided by an institutional quality assurance policy that would reflect the institution's mission and values. The University has formulated and documented policies and procedures to provide guidelines to the staff involved in the internal quality management processes. These policies are broad and cover all aspects of their systems. The policies are documented as an institutional quality assurance manual which set out clear definitions of roles and responsibilities that are widely understood by staff (both academic and general staff) involved in the quality assurance process to ensure consistent practice. The manual is subject to constant reviews and updated regularly as evidence of the institutions' determination to deliver quality education.

Academic and staff hand book- a quality manual

Leading and operating a university successfully requires managing it in a systematic and consistent manner. Hence the adoption of a quality manual as a strategic decision of the management of UPSA to implement a QMS that would guide staff actions and decisions in the delivery of superior educational value to their stakeholders. The manual established a University wide quality assurance provisions to ensure that a coordinated approach is taken across the University for ensuring the quality of its activities, processes and programmes. The staff handbook and quality manual becomes the bedrock to outline the policies, standards and academic processes to ensure conformity and consistency in service delivery within the community. This will enable the University to harmonize policies and practices across faculties/schools/institutes and departments. The handbook thus seeks to reduce ambiguity, create stakeholders satisfaction and minimize variations in the University's quest to deliver quality education service.

The University developed a policy on academic freedom, ethics and responsibility, and honesty and integrity in teaching, scholarship, and service. Faculty rights and responsibilities are covered in the university's faculty handbook. The handbook addresses professional conduct, teaching responsibilities, research and scholarship obligation, service requirements, availability and absence from campus, outside employment, summer term employment, non-discrimination policy, and professional ethics. The professional ethics section of the handbook tackles a number of issues concerning faculty, including academic freedom, ethical obligation and responsibility to students, ethical obligations and responsibilities to members of the university community, ethical obligations and responsibilities to the university as an institution, ethical obligations and responsibilities to the profession, ethical obligations and responsibilities to the public, honesty and integrity in teaching and research, conflict of interest, and intellectual property

Strategic Plan

The University has developed a five- year strategic plan captioned Vision 2012-2017. The Plan was prepare by the management of the institution in consultation with key stakeholders of the University. The Plan provides the

University with a five-year roadmap for achieving its mission, vision, goals, support services and management development. The key strategic goals identified are: building a new learning environment and enhance institutional image, enhancing research enterprise, enhancing Institutional effectiveness and competing in a global higher education environment.

Surveys and Reviews

The University uses a number of processes to evaluate the design and delivery of courses as well as soliciting information from students. All courses are evaluated by students at the end of the semester. The institution undertakes student's satisfaction surveys, students exit surveys, staff surveys and graduate experience survey to ascertain feedback on how the University meets the expectations of its key stakeholders. These feedback mechanisms and reflections allow the university to ascertain if its strategies and interventions are working or not.

Programme Development and Review

UPSA has elaborate internal programme development procedures designed to ensure that programmes developed by the departments are of high quality and also are consistent with the mission of the institution. The internal policies are to ensure that the academic programmes are developed to high quality standards. In the course of developing a programme, the inputs of all stakeholders, students, non-academic and professional staff are also required at various levels to ensure that any new programme that would be submitted to the external agency for approval has been scrutinized carefully and meets the desired standards.

Student Support Services

UPSA has in place a Student Support Services Unit under the Office of the Registrar. This unit is responsible for addressing issues that concern students especially in the following ways; Guidance and Counseling; campus life; registration support, mentoring, concern for the individual, pregnancy care advice, enrolment planning, health care, student outreach, safety and security, residence, parking lots, co- curricular activities, financial support, cafeteria services, internet services, students experience survey and disability support services.

Quality of Teaching and Learning

To manage the quality of teaching and learning, UPSA has developed a concept called Teaching and Learning Outcome Deployment (TLOD). The TLOD framework is based on the ADDIE Instructional Design Standards, the Blooms Taxonomy and principles of course preparation and assessment strategies. The standard template for course outlines and Teaching Plans are presented in a weekly format. To implement the TLOD, the moodle platform is used. This ensures that course outlines, teaching plans, and course materials and assignments are available to students at the beginning of the course.

Management Retreats

The University employs a learning organization philosophy, where it assesses itself, identifies areas of concern and attempts to resolve these through its reviews and strategic management interventions. Management organizes two review sessions each year, the midyear reviews and a weeklong Annual Review Retreats. Review reports cover, results of previous audits; feedback from Students, External Examiners, Programme Accreditation Visits, Public Accounts Committee of Parliament, internal audit report on process conformity, and Board of Examiners Report; status of corrective and Preventive actions, follow-up actions, changes that can affect the quality assurance system and recommendations for improvement. The weeklong annual management review retreat monitor and appraise performance and consider technical proposals for improvement of the system. The compendium of ideas generated from the retreat and other reviews lead to improvements of the systems.

International recognition and collaboration

To promote the confidence of the international academic community regarding the quality of academic programmes offered by the institutions, UPSA has sought multiple accreditations by international accreditation agencies. Notable among these agencies is The Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP) which is a leading specialized accreditation association for business education supporting, celebrating, and rewarding teaching excellence. The association develops, promotes and recognizes best practices that contribute to continuous improvement of business education, and accredits qualified business programmes at the associate, baccalaureate, master, and doctorate degree levels worldwide. UPSA is with a candidacy status and now preparing documentation (self study report) to be submitted for the commencement of the accreditation process.

The Commission of the African Union has recognized that QA of HEIs is one core area to revitalizing higher education and research in Africa. The Commission therefore spearheaded the development of an African Quality Rating Mechanism to establish an African system that will ensure the performance of HEIs can be compared against a

set of common criteria and to help the institutions carry out self-evaluation exercises to support the development of institutional cultures of quality. UPSA has submitted itself to be reviewed by international external reviewers through site visits to the university. The outcome of the exercise will be published and disseminated to various stakeholders of the academic community. The University is taking active part in this survey for international recognition of its internal quality assurance systems, take ownership of its QA processes, and use the AQRM questionnaire as one means of supporting continuous quality improvements and as a tool for strategic planning in quality assurance.

The University participated in the EU Connect Project as a learning process to help improve on its internal structures. In this exercise, the university submitted a self-evaluation report to external international body for assessment. From the review, the university's strengths, weaknesses were published and recommendations for further enhancements were made. This exercise was voluntary with the overarching aim of demonstrating compliance with international best practices and to assuring the community and other stakeholders of the university's effort at ensuring the quality of its programmes and activities.

Relation with the National External Quality Assurance Agency

Following the establishment of the National Accreditation Board (NAB), two major forms of QA procedures came into effect for the enhancement of teaching and learning in the Ghanaian tertiary sector. These include internal quality assurance that is undertaken by the higher institutions and the external quality evaluation, also undertaken by the NAB. This process ensures that the maintenance and improvement of the quality of education provided becomes a shared responsibility of the institution and the NAB. Legislation has made it mandatory for all the programmes taught in tertiary institutions in Ghana that lead to the award of degrees and other qualifications to be officially approved by the NAB. The UPSA works closely with the NAB and relies on both the external controls of the Accreditation Board, Academic Audits. In its functions, the NAB visits the institution to ensure its conformance with acceptable and established quality standards, while programmes are accredited for specified periods of time.

CHALLENGES

Collaboration and International Co-operation

Collaboration and co-operation in higher education is necessary to harness international support and local capacities for tertiary education. Collaboration with industry and commerce could lead to joint development of research programmes beneficial to both industry and academia. This collaboration would create more opportunities for internship and industrial attachment for teachers and students. Moreover, collaboration between industry and tertiary education institutions would enable stakeholders from industry and commerce to make inputs into the curricula of tertiary education to align academic programmes with skill needs of employers. Unfortunately, there is no adequate external involvement in programme development and approval processes. Professional associations, for instance, are not actively involved in the management of quality of the professional programmes offered by the University. Similarly, there are no appropriate mechanisms in place to obtain useful feedback from graduates, industrialists and employers.

In a related development, collaboration with international institutions would enable the University to develop joint research and sandwich academic programmes that would afford the institution opportunity to use the facilities of international collaborators to conduct research and access training programmes abroad. The University is very week in this direction and has not been able to enter into any effective collaboration. Virtual networking and collaborations among institutions and academics including linkages to academics abroad will help in establishing needed external benchmarks against which to judge institutional performance.

Academic quality is best guaranteed when responsibility for it is located as close as possible to the processes of teaching, learning and research. Those responsible for implementing policy should feel ownership of the policy. QA should be inclusive. A key success factor for an efficient QA that enhances creativity at institutional level implies engaging the whole institutional community and not just considering QA as a special purview of a special QA unit. Efforts to strengthen the structures and engage qualify staff at the faculty and departmental levels at the University have not received the same amount of attention. This, however, does not undermine the importance of setting up quality assurance structures at these levels to address quality issues and the links between these structures should always be kept in mind when developing and fostering an institutional quality culture.

In a review of the practices of quality assurance in the developed and developing nations, Lim [8] contends that quality assurance can operate effectively only if some conditions exist in the institutions. Critical among these conditions is the presence of academically qualified staff. Unfortunately, UPSA does not have adequate numbers of qualified academic staff. Most of the full-time faculty members at the university do not have terminal degrees in their respective fields that are required for teaching position in Ghana and worldwide. Furthermore the implementation of the

internal procedures has been relatively inefficient because there are inadequate qualified QA staff with the responsibility to oversee and co-ordinate the institution-wide QA processes. There is the need for professional development and skills-based training especially in technology and participative teaching techniques. The University should adopt a pro-active approach to staff training and development for teaching, learning and assessment.

Future Directions

Ghana higher education system faces several threats: dwindling institutional resources for teaching and research and accordingly less spending on higher education in Ghana, Student support systems are not strong and targeted support for various special needs is patchy. UPSA should work on launching interventions that would yield quick results through high impact initiatives in the following domains: human capital and skills of faculty and staff; infrastructure and resources; collaboration and connectivity; quality and programs.

CONCLUSION

As this survey indicated, QA processes are truly on the agenda of the UPSA and show no signs of fading away. Through the results of this survey we have hopefully been able to demonstrate that UPSA is developing its internal QA processes in a serious manner, while the results also clearly demonstrate that this is work in progress. Whilst some provisions are very well developed others are only just at the beginning of the journey. The University has opted for various combinations of processes to suit its own institutional culture and structures. This paper is of the view that promoting good practices and sharing experiences is important for the future development of QA for the institution. As noted by EUA [9] project, this paper recommended that UPSA should create platforms for both horizontal and vertical dialogue at various levels: within the institution and between faculties, institutes and departments.

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