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Chapter 2

Balancing the Focus of Quality Assurance Frameworks of Higher Education Institutions in Africa: A Ghanaian Context

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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Abstract

Higher education institutions in Africa appear to be completely copying the quality assurance (QA) frameworks of developed countries instead of conceptualising their own frameworks for delivering quality higher education outcomes in Africa. Certain factors (limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate staffing, relatively low research outputs, and limited graduate employable skills) characterising higher education are peculiar to developing countries including Africa. Using a qualitative case-study approach through interviews and document reviews, and a "PPP" conceptual framework, this study examined the foci of quality assurance frameworks of three flagship universities in Ghana. The findings indicate that the least attention is given to facilities in the quality assurance frameworks even though limited facilities pose a major challenge to the quality of higher education outcomes of the universities. The findings indicate that most attention is paid to programme areas such as teaching and learning. The results of the study recommend regular and appropriate balancing of the foci of quality assurance frameworks in the universities to enable them to give optimum attention to all key operational areas for quality outcomes.

Keywords: balancing, focus, quality assurance framework, higher education institutions

1. Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) now stands as one of the top priorities of contemporary higher education systems in Africa [1, 2]. In the past two decades, many countries in Africa have established national quality assurance bodies in order to ensure that higher education institutions do not

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compromise on quality. Due to the pressure of globalisation and internationalisation, African higher education systems and institutions have had to adopt quality assurance frameworks from the higher education systems in the developed world in order to gain acceptance and credibility [3]. Numerous factors influencing the establishment of quality assurance in higher education appear to be global in nature; however, some of the factors are peculiar to Africa.

Higher education systems in Africa have been characterised by limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, inadequate staffing, relatively low research, mass student enrolment, and limited graduate employable skills [2, 4]. It requires a pragmatist approach to conduct quality assurance in Africa's higher education systems. Higher education institutions in Africa must conceptualise their quality assurance frameworks strategically in order to make such frameworks fit for purpose [2]. For instance, in developed countries, higher education systems are characterised by adequate facilities, and therefore, facilities might attract less attention in the framing of their quality assurance systems. Higher education systems in Africa are characterised by inadequate facilities which require that quality assurance frameworks in African higher education systems give more attention to facilities than those of developed countries.

Improving low employable skills and improving research quality are constantly reported as key concerns of the higher education systems of Africa [2]. This gives an indication that quality assurance frameworks in contemporary African higher education do not appear to be adequately addressing the quality challenges of the higher education systems. Quality assurance frameworks of many African higher education systems depict robustness but in actuality, do not adequately address the peculiar nature of quality concerns currently experienced by African higher education. Of course, there are global standards for quality assurance in higher education to enable comparability of outcomes, but quality assurance also needs to include localised differences [3, 5] so that quality assurance frameworks are compatible with context. Quality assurance frameworks in Europe and Africa may have the same features but at a particular point may focus on different areas in order to balance quality assurance activities for improved outcomes. A pragmatist conceptualisation of quality assurance frameworks needs to mirror the prevailing quality concerns it seeks to address. This calls for continual balancing of the foci of quality assurance frameworks to reflect the changing concerns of quality in higher education [6].

Currently, the foci of quality assurance frameworks of higher education institutions in Ghana, particularly universities, are understudied, resulting in a gap in information to inform effective balancing of the foci in order to improve higher education outcomes. This study sought to investigate the coverage of quality assurance policies and practices of universities in Ghana and the proportional attention given to each operational activity covered by the quality assurance frameworks. The study was intended to contribute to the debate on what should be captured by the quality assurance frameworks of universities and how to ensure effective balancing of the foci of quality assurance frameworks in order to address the changing concerns in the Ghanaian higher education system. Therefore, the research question for the study was "What do quality assurance frameworks of higher education institutions in Ghana give the least attention to, and why?"

Ghana, the site of this study, is a republican state located on the west coast of Africa, bordered to the west by the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, to the east by the Republic of Togo, to

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the north by the Republic of Burkina Faso, and to the south by the Gulf of Guinea. Ghana gained independence from Britain on 6th March, 1957 and subsequently became a republic on 1st July 1960. Ghana's population is 25,905,000 with females comprising 51.3 and males 48.7% [7]. The country's population growth rate is 2.1% and life expectancy is estimated at 61 years [7]. The country's adult literacy rate is 74.1% [8]. Oil, gold and cocoa are Ghana's main exports. Ghana is also endowed with agricultural potential, including forests and significant tracts of savannah land with high agricultural value; however, these are not being fully developed [9]. Ghana's economy is the fastest growing and the second-largest economy in West Africa after Nigeria [10]. Its gross domestic product (GDP) is US$ 48.18 billion and the gross national income (GNI) per capita stands at US$ 1770 [7]. Ghana is an emerging economy and is currently classified by the World Bank as a lower middle level income country [10]. The country's vision is to attain fully-fledged middle-income status by the year 2020 [11]. Ghana wants to achieve this via human resource development and industrialisation [11]. Despite these aspirations, Ghana's current economy appears gloomy. Ghana faces key challenges in its development, including higher education. In addition, Ghana has a large balance of payment deficits, particularly large for a country classified as lower middle income [12]. Ghana's quest to sustain its economic growth and seek competitive advantage in the globalised knowledge economy will be supported by the higher education institutions graduating a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce.

2. Ghana's higher education sector

Ghana's higher education system was bequeathed to her by Britain but the system has since been reformed following independence from Britain in 1957. Currently, higher education in Ghana covers universities and non-university institutions such as polytechnics, colleges of education, colleges of nursing, and other institutions [13]. Higher education institutions in Ghana are public, private, national or internationally owned. The universities offer bachelor, master and doctoral degree programmes while the non-university institutions deliver diplomas and certificates [13, 14]. The mode of higher education teaching in Ghana includes traditional on-campus, distance and online formats [13]. Ghana's higher education system is not immune to global trends. It is characterised by mass participation, a decline in state funding, globalisation, internationalisation and privatisation [4, 15]. Enrolment in higher education has increased sharply in recent times and continues to rise. For example, higher education enrolment rose from below 9997 in 1992 to more than 132,000 in 2010 (Bailey 2011) and 396, 264 in 2015 [13]. This notwithstanding, only about 10% of the age cohort from junior secondary schools gain admission to higher education institutions [16]. In Ghana, enrolments in the higher education sector tilt towards humanities but the country requires a ratio of 60:40 sciences to humanities human power base to propel its development agenda [17]. For instance, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and arts/humanities ratio between the years 2002–2003 and 2007–2008 in Ghanaian public universities stood at 35:65 and 38:62, respectively [17]. Ghana's higher education sector is also characterised by gender disparity. The number of female students enrolled in the sector is far less than males except in the nurses training colleges where females outnumber males in a ratio of 7:3 [13].

The government primarily finances higher education in Ghana. Education covers 23.3% of Ghana's fiscal budget [18]. Out of this, 21.6% is allocated to the higher education sector [18] but unfortunately, this falls short of the funds required by Ghanaian higher education institutions due to growth in student enrolment. This situation has triggered several financial initiatives. The government has established Ghana Education Trust (GET) to assist higher education institutions with additional funds for infrastructural development [19] but this excludes private higher education institutions. Ghanaian private higher education institutions only obtain financial assistance from the government in the form of tax exemptions. Though these appear to have enhanced the financial viability of most private Ghanaian higher education institutions, compared to peers in the global north, higher education is still underfunded, impacting negatively on the quality of higher education system.

3. Quality assurance in Ghana's higher education system

Ghanaian higher education institutions have been placed mainly under two external quality regulators, the National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) and the National Accreditation Board (NAB) to monitor and control academic activities. NCTE oversees the proper administration of schools tagged as higher education institutions. It is responsible for ensuring that the academic activities of higher education institutions are financially sustainable and support national development [15, 20]. NAB on the other hand is Ghana's key quality assurance agency. It was established through the enactment of the NAB law 1993 (PNDC Law 317) but has subsequently been replaced by National Accreditation Board Act, 2007, Act 774 [21]. Its primary responsibility is to safeguard quality higher education provision in the country. NAB's main quality assurance strategy is accreditation. This covers institutions and academic programmes [15, 21]. In addition, NAB uses a strategy known as "affiliation" to ensure quality education delivery by outsourcing its quality improvement mandate to Ghanaian public universities. Affiliation in this context refers to a relationship in which, by mutual agreement, the affiliating partner agrees to accredit the academic programmes and issues academic awards to an affiliated partner institution [22]. In this regard, NAB requires Ghanaian higher education institutions, especially private university colleges, polytechnics, and specialised public colleges to be affiliated to long established Ghanaian public universities in order to offer academic programmes. This affiliation relationship is expected to last for a minimum of 10 years [23], and it is intended that the universities assist these institutions in building their internal capacity for quality assurance.

Professional associations are also major players in the enactment of quality assurance in the Ghanaian higher education system. Examples of such associations in Ghana are Ghana Medical and Dental Council, Nurses and Midwifery Council of Ghana, General Legal Council, and the Ghana Pharmacy Council [24–27]. Their involvement includes accreditation of professional study programmes, participation in accreditation panels set up by NAB and participation in curriculum review exercises [28]. Though these roles played by external quality assurance regulators have enhanced the image, deepened public trust and increased the attractiveness of Ghanaian higher education institutions, external quality assurance is still going through reforms and can best be described as "work-in-progress".

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4. Conceptual orientation of the study

This study sought to answer the question "What do quality assurance frameworks of higher education institutions in Ghana give the least attention to, and why?" This question requires a focus on key operational areas that higher education institutions are responsible for. A "PPP" conceptual framework, which argues that higher education institutions are responsible for people, programmes, and facilities, was adopted for the study. The "PPP" is an acronym for people, programme, and place. The PPP was used by Filardo [29], the Executive Director of Twenty-First Century School Fund of the District of Columbia in the United States. She described PPP as a concept for planning physical facilities in education. PPP is a logical framework that could be used for classifying and analysing the operational activities of higher education institutions for the purpose of quality assurance and hence its adoption and adaptation. From a logical standpoint, a quality assurance framework for any higher education institution in Ghana ought to give attention to people, programme, and place in a balanced manner if it is to sufficiently address stakeholders' expectations of higher education quality. From the perspective of the PPP concept, a balanced quality assurance framework looks like **Figure 1**.

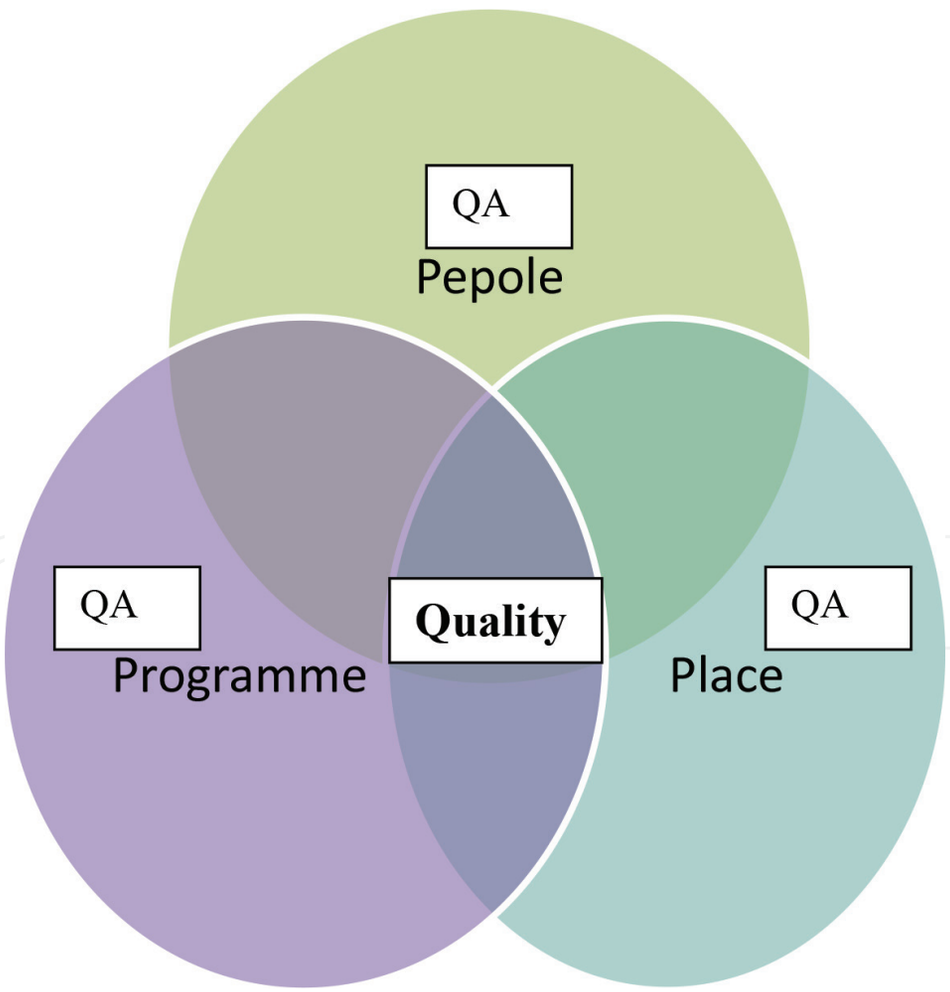


Figure 1. Balancing the focus of a QA framework in HEIs.

"People" in the context of the PPP framework for higher education is taken to refer to the coverage of internal and external stakeholders in quality assurance activities of higher education institutions. In a typical university context in Ghana, internal stakeholders include the governing council members, management team members, senior academic and administrative members, senior staff, junior staff, and junior members (students). External stakeholders on the other hand include graduates, employers of graduates, professional representatives, regulatory authorities representatives, and funders [30]. Given that quality has multiple perspectives which demand alignment of different perspectives [28], quality assurance activities within higher education institutions ought to cover and involve all these key stakeholders. Enhancing quality in higher education demands qualified and highly motivated staff members who are committed to quality outcomes [31]. This involves staff participation in quality assurance activities through effective and efficient top-down and bottom-up communication channels and rigorous staff recruitment processes, development, and incentive systems [31]. It also requires qualified, highly motivated, and empowered students who provide feedback on their learning experiences to inform improvement activities [32]. Equally, achieving quality also involves information from all key internal and external stakeholders through feedback loops [31].

"Programme" in the context of the PPP framework for higher education represents all the processes, procedures, and activities within an institution. This includes curricular design, teaching and learning, governance systems, leadership and management functions, professional development of staff, research and outreach activities, student assessment, staff recruitment, student admissions, institutional ceremonies, student support services, and partnership and cooperation. A quality assurance framework of a higher education institution ought to cover all these in addition to other operational areas and activities of the institution in order to sufficiently guarantee and enact stakeholders' expectations of quality.

"Place" on the other hand stands for space and facilities of an educational institution. It has been argued that maintaining and improving quality in higher education is directly proportional to the quality of facilities and space [33, 34, 35]. Appropriate space and facilities are required to support every activity of any higher education institution [35]. The quality of learning, teaching, research, and community service of a higher education institution is dependent on space and facilities of the institution [35]. Therefore, place ought to attract equal attention in a quality assurance framework of any higher education institution just like people and programmes. The common physical facilities which are usually under the microscope of QA activities are teaching and learning, residential, recreational, and transportation facilities, in addition to space for physical facilities development. The interplay of people, programme, and place supports positive outcomes in higher education. Quality is maintained and enhanced at the intersection of the circles containing the PPP as depicted in **Figure 1**. Quality cannot be maintained and enhanced by giving negligible attention to any part of the PPP framework discussed so far because high-quality educational outcomes depend on quality people and their involvement, quality programmes, and quality facilities.

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5. Focus of a QA framework in higher education

We argue that a resilient quality assurance framework in higher education must meet the basic condition of stability if it is to achieve quality enhancement or improvement. A stable QA framework (internal or external) is a balanced framework where all the key components receive equal attention at some point, as represented in **Figure 1**. This framework offers quality assurance and enhancement opportunities for the institution.

However, a quality assurance framework in higher education institutions could become unstable as a result of less attention to one of the key components. In such a situation, the framework may look like **Figures 2**, **3**, or **4**, depending on which component is receiving the least attention. In **Figure 2**, it is evident that place receives the least attention in the quality assurance practices of the institution. In this instance, the assumption is that optimum attention has been given to all the three key operational areas but there are quality concerns with people and programmes, which have necessitated a shift of attention from place. In **Figure 3**, programme receives the least attention in quality assurance practices, and in **Figure 4**, people receive the least attention, suggesting that in these instances, prevailing quality concerns have warranted the shift of attention.

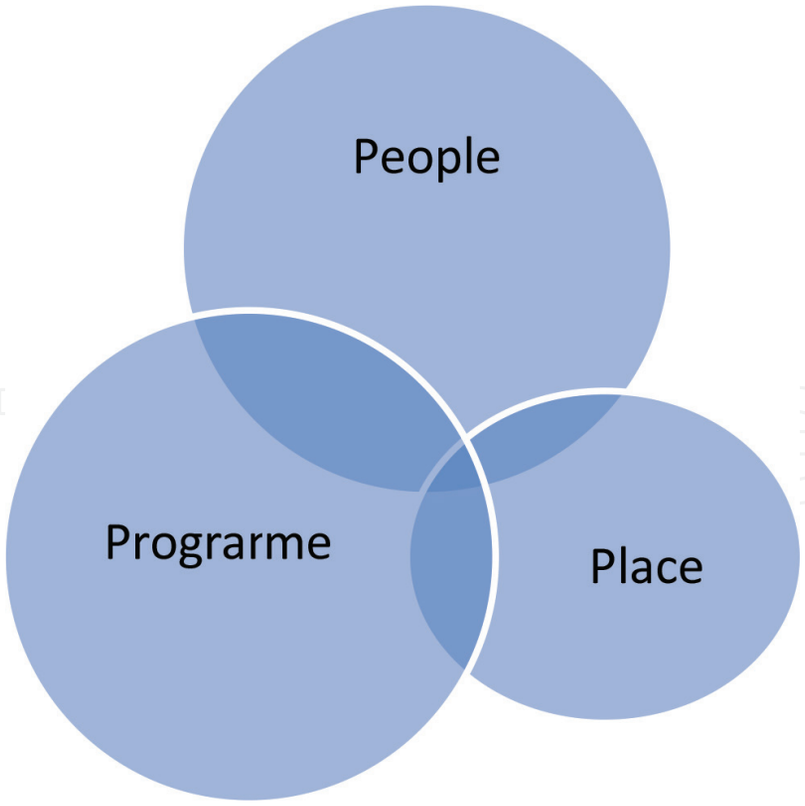


Figure 2. An unstable QA framework—least attention to place.

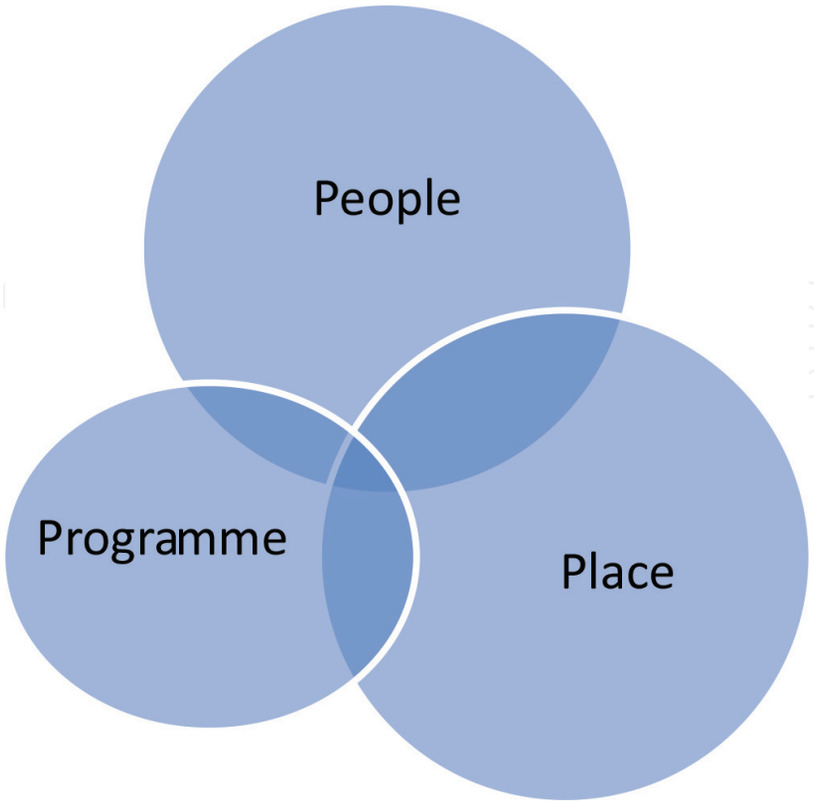


Figure 3. An unstable QA framework—least attention to Programme.

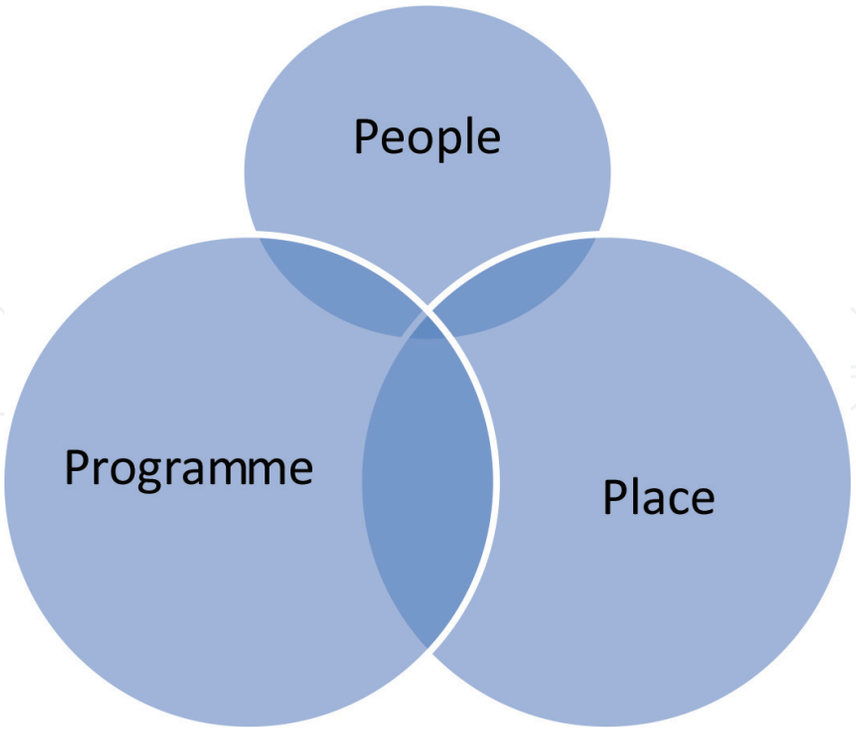


Figure 4. An unstable QA framework—least attention to People.

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When such situations happen, there is the need to stabilise the quality assurance framework by increasing attention to the component that is receiving the least attention. We argue in this conceptualisation that this balance is a necessary condition for any resilient quality assurance framework in higher education because our operational definition of quality assurance is "mechanisms put in place by institutions to guarantee and enact stakeholders' expectations of quality" [28]. It stands to reason that at any particular point, there is likely to be disproportionate attention given to the three (people, programme, and place) areas of the quality assurance framework depending on the quality concerns of a particular higher education institution. However, stability of the framework is a pointer to an assurance of quality. In practical terms, policies and activities of an internal quality assurance framework of a higher education institution must focus on balancing the focus of the framework in order to facilitate quality enhancement.

6. Study methods

Investigating the quality assurance frameworks implemented by Ghanaian universities followed a qualitative approach because of the subjective views about quality in Ghana [36]. Adopting a case-study design [37], a purposive sampling technique was used to select three quality assurance officers from three flagship Ghanaian public universities whose quality assurance policies and practices are believed to have had a greater influence on other higher education institutions in Ghana. This made it more likely that information gathered from the quality assurance officers would be information rich [38]. As part of pre-interview arrangements, the officers were given information sheets. These noted the nature and purpose of the study and the benefits they stood to gain from participating. They were also informed that participation in the research was voluntary and that they were free to opt out at any time. The key informants were interviewed in-depth for approximately 1 hour. The interview interaction was fluid rather than rigid [39] but was shaped by the key question linked to the objectives of the study. The question was "What do quality assurance frameworks of higher education institutions in Ghana give the least attention to, and why?" During the data collection, the question was divided into two—the first part focused on collecting data on what receives attention in the quality assurance frameworks and the second part concentrated on what receives the least attention and why? Through in-depth interviews, the participants shared their quality assurance ideas and how these ideas were put into practice. The interviews were audiotaped to enhance accuracy. Data from the in-depth interviews were transcribed. Additional data were also obtained from institutional documents such as quality assurance activity reports and policies. These were coded and thematically analysed with the assistance of Nvivo 10 software. Preliminary themes were clustered into groups of themes [40]. Data from the interviews were corroborated and augmented with evidence from documents to enhance the credibility of the findings [41, 42]. Due to ethical considerations, confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents and the universities they work in were assured by assigning aliases to their names and their institutions [43, 44]. The major themes which the data were coded into were people, programme, and place.

The sub-themes present under people were internal stakeholders and external stakeholders who were involved in quality assurance practices of the universities. Programmes sub-themes were leadership and management practices, teaching and learning activities, student assessment, curriculum, professional development activities, research, staff recruitment, student admissions, and student support services. Place sub-themes were space, teaching/learning infrastructure, research infrastructure, and social amenities. These themes and sub-themes are presented and discussed below.

7. Results and discussions

We present and discuss the results under the major themes of people, programme, and Place, and in line with the two key parts of the research questions: what receives attention in the quality assurance frameworks and what receives the least attention and why?

7.1. What receives attention?

7.1.1. People

Collectively, stakeholders mentioned by respondents as involved in the case universities quality assurance policies and practices include senior members (academic), senior members (administration), students, senior staff, graduates, employers of graduates, professional bodies, regulatory bodies, and funding bodies but variations exist among universities. In university A, a respondent said, "*Here in this University, stakeholders involved in quality assurance practices are senior members (both academic and administration), students, senior staff, alumni, employers of our graduates, professional bodies, NCTE, NAB, and donor agencies*." In university B, a respondent made this claim, "*We involve senior members (both academic and administration), students, senior staff, professional bodies, and NAB in our quality assurance practices*." In university C, a respondent had this to say "In terms of people, our quality assurance practices involve *every member of staff and our external stakeholders such as, employers of our graduates, professional bodies, and NAB*."

These responses were cross-examined through the quality assurance policy documents of the universities. In the quality assurance policy document of University A, it was stated that *in the effective implementation of this policy, there must be conscious efforts for collaboration internally (management, staff and students) and externally (other universities, industry and development partners).* University B's policy document states that the principles of its quality assurance include *external peer review, and ownership and involvement of staff and students of the quality assurance process.* In the policy document of University C, it is stated that *there will be regular external evaluations, involvement of professional bodies, potential employers and other relevant sections of the society, all staff, temporary and permanent, and all categories of students.*

It is clear from the interview responses and policy documents that relevant stakeholders are involved in the quality assurance policy and practice of the universities. The list of stakeholders from the policy documents which aligns with practice according to the interview data seemed comprehensive. This is consistent with best practice as reported in the literature [30, 31, 45] that all key stakeholders (both internal and external) must be responsible for

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achieving quality in higher education. However, we did not explore the nature of involvement of stakeholders mentioned by respondents and the policy documents due to the focus of the study, even though we acknowledge that it is important. For example, if staff and students' involvement in quality assurance is only about validating their qualifications and results, respectively, then it is not enough because they should also be involved in providing feedback for continuous improvement [31].

7.1.2. Programme

Programme areas of coverage by the quality assurance frameworks of the case universities include leadership and management practices, teaching and learning activities, student assessment, curriculum, professional development activities, research, staff recruitment, student admissions, and student support services. However, these were not uniform across all the case universities. These programme areas represent collective responses that were coded. In University A, a respondent reported, "*Our quality assurance activities cover: Teaching and learning activities, Student Assessment, Professional development activities, Research, Staff recruitment, and Student admissions*." In University B, a respondent said, "*Our quality assurance activities cover: Leadership and management practices, Teaching and learning activities, Research, Staff recruitment, and Student admissions*." Responses from University C were similar to University B.

These responses were explored further through the quality assurance policy documents of the universities. University A's policy document indicates that it shall *develop strong quality assurance and planning mechanisms that apply to all programmes, processes, procedures, support services and structures across the University*. In the case of University B, it is stated that quality assurance activities shall be used to *advise the Academic Curriculum, Quality and Staff Development Committee on the determination and maintenance of acceptable levels of academic standards with respect to teaching, learning and research.* University C on the other hand has captured in its policy document that quality assurance shall focus on:

> *developing and maintaining, through enhanced support processes, quality academic programmes appropriate to the academic strengths of the University where a recognizable market has been clearly identified and ensure that all programmes are of high standard and of continued relevance to graduate labour markets and the needs of the workforce in the country.* It adds that *the University shall develop and refine internal quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms that are appropriate and shall apply such mechanisms systematically across all programmes offered by the University, all services rendered to society and all support services provided to students and staff.*

It is clear that the policy documents tend to provide the general framework to guide the practice of quality assurance and in most cases, do not define exact details of what the practitioners should do. For example, in University A, the policy document states that "it shall develop strong quality assurance and planning mechanisms that apply to all programmes, processes, procedures, support services and structures across the University." This, according to the interview data, was implemented to focus on "Teaching and learning activities, Student assessment, Professional development activities, Research, Staff recruitment, and Student admissions." Nonetheless, the alignment between policy and practice is discernible, just that some key programme areas such as student support services and institutional safety were conspicuously missing in quality assurance practice.

7.1.3. Place

Respondents from all the case universities indicated that their quality assurance practices cover physical facilities and locations even though there were differences in the type of facilities that were given attention to in their quality assurance practice. At University A, a respondent said, "*in our quality assurance practice, we check teaching and learning facilities, residential facilities, recreational facilities and spaces*." A respondent from University B indicated, "*Our quality assurance practices cover only teaching and learning facilities because we are concerned with academic quality*." At University C, a respondent stated, "*Our quality assurance practices focus on teaching and learning and research facilities*."

We explored the quality assurance policy documents to find out if facilities and locations are captured. In University A's quality assurance policy document, a focus on facilities and locations is captured as "*the policy covers infrastructure and learning resources, social amenities and information dissemination structures*." There was no clear evidence of quality assurance of facilities in the quality assurance policy document of University B, except that the scope and application section of the policy indicate that the policy applies to all academic areas and aspects of the University's operations. The policy document of University C captures facilities and location this way: "*we shall continually monitor and regularly assess the appropriateness and adequacy of support services provided for students and staff, especially in respect of adequacy and quality of Study materials, space and teaching/learning infrastructure; Social amenities, including health, catering, recreational and other services*." Under the coverage of facilities and locations (place), there is a reasonable alignment between policy and practice. However, in practice, more facilities appear to be covered than indicated in the policy document.

We have so far analysed and discussed data on what receives attention in the quality assurance frameworks of the universities selected for this study. This is supposed to feed into the analysis and discussion on the second part of the research question that guided the study. This second part of the research question is "what receives the least attention and why," which is the focus of the next section.

7.2. What receives the least attention and why?

One of the assumptions of this study was based on the fact that quality assurance frameworks of universities may not provide attention to key operational areas equally, usually for strategic reasons. In this section, we present, analyse, and discuss findings on which key operational areas of the universities involved in this study receive the least attention in quality assurance frameworks. This part of the research question is addressed with findings mainly from the interviews because the focus is to examine what pertains in quality assurance practice rather than written policy. As usual and in line with the conceptual framework of this study, the findings were coded into key operational areas of people, programme, and place.

Respondents compared attention given to people, programme, and place in the practice of quality assurance in their universities. In two of the universities of this study, programme receives the greatest attention in quality assurance practice followed by people before place,

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implying that place receives the least attention. At University A, this is what a respondent had to say

> *Regularly, about fifty percent of our quality assurance activities is devoted to programme operational areas of the university. We also give about thirty percent of our quality assurance activities to people involved in the university's operations while we devote the remaining twenty percent of our QA activities to our physical facilities. Teaching and learning activities formed the majority of our quality assurance activities regularly but we sometimes also look at curriculum, governance, research, student support services, professional development activities, student admissions and staff recruitment.*

At University B, a similar response was provided. However, at University C, the greatest attention is given to people, followed by programme while place receives the least attention as a key operational area for quality assurance concentration. This is what was said at University C: "*We give about forty-five percent of our quality assurance activities to stakeholders involved in the university's operations and then thirty-five percent of attention is given to programme operational areas. The remaining twenty percent attention is given to our facilities*."

The two Universities that give the greatest attention to programme as an operation area in their quality assurance practices provided the following reasons:

> *Programmes are the back bone or life-wire of the institution that needs much concentration because of the image it gives to the institution and without it, the University will not function. In addition, programme quality and activities related to it ensure competitiveness. Therefore, much attention is devoted to its coverage using experts and experience.*

> *The core mandate of any institution centres on good programmes. The quality of programmes therefore seems imperative to be monitored. The core mandate of the university is teaching, learning and research. Without programmes, the university will fail to exist. Therefore, very much efforts are put into ensuring programmes are of standards.*

The university that gives greatest attention to people also has these reasons to provide

> *The university recognizes that stakeholders are the most important aspect of quality assurance so they are included to ensure total quality management. Institution practice a culture of quality, there must be environments that all stakeholders must be involved in quality implementation to achieve what we call Total Quality Management. To a very great extent, both academic and administrative senior members are very much involved in the internal quality assurance practices that contribute to the quality of our programmes. Employers of our graduates, professional bodies, NCTE, NAB, some donor agencies, alumni and students also contribute to our quality assurance activities. However, some of these stakeholders are less involved in the quality assurance activities of the institution because they are not experts in the field of ensuring quality so we involve them only when we require their attention.*

Place appears to receive the least attention even though all the respondents recognise it as a key operational area which must be given attention in quality assurance practice. These were some of the comments made by respondents:

> *Physical facilities are found to be factors of quality measurement and therefore contribute to quality practices. (University A response)*

> *Efforts are put in to ensure convenient and comfortable physical facilities for the smooth running of the programmes, thus complementing quality assurance. (University B response)*

> *Most of the facilities are key and strongly needed in the school to facilitate teaching and learning. In other words, teaching and learning facilities as well as residential facilities support student learning hence quality delivery cannot be effective without these physical facilities. Nonetheless, facilities form part of any quality assurance measure of every institution hence, their monitoring is a major concern though requires minimum concentration. That aside, there has been progress in recent times concerning the physical facilities of the institution and the massive build-up give credence to the assertions on percentages made in this area. (University C response)*

From the responses, the importance of giving attention to place by quality assurance frameworks is not debatable. It is, however, intriguing that place receives the least attention in quality assurance practice. The reason provided for giving the least attention to place in their quality assurance frameworks is not consistent with the principle of equity in quality assurance practice to indicate that place has obtained optimum attention to the extent that attention could be shifted. It should be noted that quality higher education outcomes depend on quality people, programme, and Place [33–35].

8. Implications for quality assurance policy and practice in higher education

There is the need for higher education institutions to be strategic in the framing of their quality assurance policies and the practice of same and ensuring that equity is applied to key operational areas of their mandates. This will enable them to balance the foci of their quality assurance frameworks to achieve enhanced quality and also to make their quality assurance frameworks resilient to the changing dynamics of contemporary higher education. In doing so, the conceptual framework of this study offers higher education institutions a more comprehensive frame to classify their operational activities and weigh them on the scale of quality assurance to ensure a strategic balance needed for enhanced quality.

9. Limitations

Even though the study has measured quality assurance policy and practice of the universities involved, on a scale of three dimensions (people, programme and place) as key operational areas, it did not itemise activities under these three dimensions exhaustively. Therefore, not all indicators for quality assurance in higher education have been covered under the conceptual framework of the study. Similarly, the nature of stakeholders' involvement in quality assurance practice was not examined to warrant comments on the adequacy or appropriateness of their involvement.

10. Conclusion

It is now obvious that the scale of quality assurance frameworks of the universities involved in this study weighs in favour of programme, and place receives the least attention among the three key operational areas of the universities as defined by the conceptual framework of this

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study. There is a clear indication of over-concentration of quality assurance activities on programme areas such as teaching and learning, curriculum design, research, student admission, staff recruitment, staff development, and student support services. Even under programme areas, teaching and learning appear to take the centre stage of quality assurance activities. This gives an indication of imbalance with regard to the focus of quality assurance activities in the universities. The over-concentration of quality assurance activities on programme areas suggests that these areas have the greatest quality concern that must be addressed as a matter of urgency. If this is the reality, then a strategic quality assurance framework is being implemented but even then regular balancing is required to maintain the stability of the framework. However, the context information provided in the earlier section suggests that the current major challenges facing universities, and the higher education sector of Ghana in general, are limited physical infrastructure and graduate employability due to skills mismatch [2, 4, 15]. These challenges are, to a large extent, attributable to insufficient facilities and stakeholder involvement in defining and implementing mechanisms for achieving quality rather than core activities of teaching and learning [16].

The situation requires more strategic attention to stakeholder involvement and facilities in quality assurance policy and practice. More attention to facilities is needed to enable qualified applicants to be admitted and to support quality programme delivery. More involvement of professional bodies, employers, and alumni is also needed in situations of skill mismatch. Meanwhile, the findings of the study suggest that stakeholder involvement is even over-concentrated on senior academic and administrative members making it "business as usual." A strategic quality assurance framework must be pragmatist oriented in order to solve practical issues. Over-concentration on teaching and learning activities suggests unstable quality assurance frameworks for the universities which are not capable of achieving enhanced quality. Therefore, there is the need to apply the principle of equity in quality assurance policy and practice such that quality key operational areas that have been underrepresented in quality assurance policy and practice are given more attention in order to stabilise the quality assurance frameworks for enhanced quality.

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