

Compliance with accreditation measures in Ghanaian universities – Students’ perspectives

— **Preprint version** —

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Abstract: The article is based on a study conducted among students in selected Ghanaian universities in the year 2015 to confirm the continued maintenance (or improvement) of the minimum quality standards, based on which accreditation had been granted to their respective institutions. Although the students might not have been conversant with the accrediting agency’s standards, these requirements were provided as possible answers from which the students were to select appropriate and unbiased responses, based on their observations. These indicators related to curriculum, student assessment policies, student assessment of course content and teaching (SACT), policy on ethics, student/staff ratios, physical facilities and library provisions. The responses from both public and private university students confirmed varying degrees of conformity and, or compliance with the Ghanaian accrediting agency’s standards by the universities under its regulation.

Keywords: Accreditation, Indicators, Standards, Evaluation, Compliance, Students’ Perspectives.

Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that students are major stakeholders in the higher education enterprise and many, if not most, of the quality measures put in place by regulatory bodies such as accrediting agencies, are geared towards satisfying students' teaching and learning needs. The conclusions from the focused literature review, of student feedback systems in higher education, by Alderman et al. (2012) support this assertion. They concluded from their work that students were widely regarded as important stakeholders in the universities and surveys of their experience were established components of evaluation systems. Student evaluations, as we shall see, have become part and parcel of many universities' internal processes. While such student evaluations may not form part of the external evaluation system, some accrediting agencies often demand evidence of their existence in the universities as part of their external review systems (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007; Okojie, 2008).

This study aims to find out from students in Ghanaian universities, the continued existence of, and compliance with, measures designed by the accrediting body to ensure, at least, the maintenance of minimum standards in seven key areas that the agency assessed and passed before granting accreditation to the universities. As stated in the accrediting agency's evaluation instruments these key areas were, curriculum, student assessment policies, student assessment of course content and teaching, policy on ethics, student/staff ratios, physical facilities and library provisions. It is important to emphasise that, at the time of the study, students might not have known that all seven identified areas formed part of the accrediting body's assessment criteria.

The setting of the study (Ghana) notwithstanding, the results of the study may be useful to policy makers and higher education practitioners, especially, in Africa and other developing countries as the practice of accreditation in these countries mostly follow similar patterns. The results of the study would likely enhance the understanding of quality assurance measures, as practised by accrediting bodies in Africa.

This study aims to give higher education practitioners in developed countries a better appreciation of students' experiences with respect to quality issues in developing countries. This appreciation will be helpful, for instance, in the practitioners' encounter with students migrating for graduate studies in developed countries.

The study sought responses on issues that related directly to student matters in the accreditation agency's requirements for accrediting universities. In the agency's instrument – labelled Accreditation Panel Reporting Form (APRF) - evaluators were to collect students' views on teaching and learning with the aim of monitoring compliance with the agency's requirements (National Accreditation Board website, www.nab.gov.gh, 2014). The evaluators usually collected these student views, during assessment exercises for programme accreditation. This study, however, sought to do an independent and more detailed monitoring exercise to determine, whether the accrediting body's requirements were still present in, and being complied with, by the universities after the assessment exercises.

In Ghana, and perhaps many, non-European, jurisdictions evaluation panels conducting assessments for the grant of accreditation do not have provision for the inclusion of students. Thus, this study sought students' unbiased views to help determine whether the accreditation procedure's requirements, as found in the evaluation instruments, existed in their respective universities. We compared the responses provided by students from both state-funded (public) universities and private universities to determine the extent of compliance with the accreditation requirements. The expectation was that the private universities would be more compliant with the accreditation body's requirements as private provision of university education was permitted after the regulatory body had been established to supervise that new development. Thus, the private universities had the benefit of best practices to adopt from the

public universities, many of whose establishment preceded that of the regulatory body. It was also the expectation that the regulatory body would prevent the private universities from adopting ‘unhealthy’ practices such as excessive student intake, not matched by existing capacities, which had characterised some of the public universities, particularly from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s.

The main research question addressed by the study is:

Do university students’ perspectives confirm or deny the existence of policies/measures in line with accreditation requirements in Ghana?

A subsidiary question, following from the main one which is also addressed is:

Do the responses have any association with the type of university – public or private – attended?

Brief review of the enforcement of accreditation measures in developing countries.

Developments leading to the establishment of regulatory regimes such as accreditation and the enforcement of its measures mainly to assure quality provision, have been well documented in the literature (Westerheijden, 2013; Materu & Righetti, 2010). In many developing countries, the thirst for higher education and the consequent expansion of provision to include investors other than the state, mainly led to the establishment of accrediting bodies to regulate the sector and also ensure compliance with minimum quality standards by the institutions. The mode of operation of the accrediting bodies often show some similarities while others indicate differences. For instance, some of the bodies operate at the institutional level only (e.g. the QAA in the UK and regional accreditors in the USA) while others operate at the programme level only (e.g. specialised accreditors in the USA and in Europe) and, still others, at both levels (e.g. several regional agencies in Germany and national agency NVAO in the Netherlands, see also: Harvey, 2004; Materu, 2007).

The mandate of the accrediting bodies sometimes differ from one jurisdiction to the other. In certain countries, Nigeria for example, these bodies regulate only universities while in others, Ghana as an instance, the mandate covers all tertiary education institutions. Countries such as Mexico, technically do not regard accreditation as compulsory but, like its northern neighbour U.S., external accreditation influences funding decisions (Kapur & Crowley, 2008).

Howsoever the mandates of these accrediting bodies, a common function that almost runs through them is the development and enforcement of minimum standards that govern the establishment and operation of higher education institutions. Brazil for instance requires any institution that desires to address itself as a university to have a third of its staff possessing advanced degrees and been employed on full time basis (Sidhu & Torres, 2006). In El Salvador, a period of 24 months is given to those wishing to establish universities to comply with specified standards. Institutions that flout the standards after establishment risk closure by the accrediting authorities (Kapur & Crowley, 2008). In many European countries, institutional accreditation or evaluation is required for continued operation of a higher education institution (as in the UK) or for recognition at a certain level (e.g. doctoral-granting in Norway); in practically all European countries, compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance defines the threshold quality assurance level (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education et al., 2015; European Commission, EACEA & Eurydice, 2018).

Similar to what happens in developed countries, some developing countries have formed regional accrediting bodies to coordinate the activities of their individual accrediting agencies, especially in the areas of quality development and in rooting out rogue providers. The Central American Accreditation Council, for instance, has been formed to coordinate accreditation programmes of the countries in the Latin American region and to set standards

for the evaluation of degree programmes for both public and private universities in the area (Lloyd, 2005). The Southern African Universities Regional Association (SARUA) was also formed to increase collaboration among its member countries, develop graduate programmes and improve quality provision (Materu, 2007). International organisations such as the Educational Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and the Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (ENQA) perform similar functions in Europe.

Common features that run through the mandates of African accrediting bodies are the assessment of institutions and/or their programmes for accreditation/reaccreditation and the approval/denial for the establishment of private higher education institutions (Materu, 2007). For decisions on approval for the establishment of private institutions, input factors such as staffing, curricula and physical facilities are assessed against specified criteria. Private institutions are approved for establishment only if they met the minimum standards set for those indicators. Public institutions are established by legislation and the state usually ensures that the minimum quality requirements are in place before they commence operations. Accredited institutions due for reaccreditation are expected to show improvements beyond the set minimum standards failure of which the validity periods of their accreditation may be shortened or admission of fresh students banned until acceptable remedial measures had been put in place.

Academics and professionals, such as architects (for the assessment of physical facilities) and accountants (for the assessment of financial sustainability) serve as evaluators for the institutional assessments that may lead to the grant of accreditation. In Ghana, the accreditation procedure requires evaluators to conduct interviews among many institutional actors such as academic staff and relevant senior administrative personnel, for instance, the Registrar and the Head of Finance, and, where necessary demand documentary proof of compliance with the accreditation requirements. More importantly, students are also interviewed to ascertain their (i.e. students') level of satisfaction with the higher education delivery, as part of the assessment exercise for accreditation. While many European countries include a student representative on their external evaluation teams, the closest Ghanaian students come to be associated with the processes leading to accreditation of institutions and/or their programmes appear to be the requirement for them to periodically evaluate the courses attended by them, the mode of delivery and the facilities provided to ensure the likelihood of success in their learning experience.

It was against this backdrop that this study was conducted to establish, from the students, whether the accrediting body's requirements, designed to enhance the quality of students' teaching and learning experiences, existed in their institutions after the body's initial assessments for accreditation exercises. The expectation was that this would enable, to assess better whether, students as important stakeholders were not being short-changed by the lack of implementation of evaluators' recommendations to achieve the accreditation norms and criteria in the assessed higher education institutions in Ghana.

Brief review of literature on student evaluations

Student evaluations within higher education institutions had been traced to the mid-1920s, with the main purpose being the provision of feedback to academics on their teaching delivery. In contemporary times, student evaluations have been routinised in many universities worldwide with their results utilised for formative - to guide teaching practice, and summative - to inform management decision-making - purposes (Algozzine *et al.*, 2004; Richardson, 2005). These evaluations, such as have been alluded to by the authors, are usually carried out by academics or administrators within the institutions. The current study, however, was carried out by researchers outside the subject institutions with the expectation that more objective responses would be provided by the students.

Marsh (2007), in his work on student evaluation surveys spanning a period of almost three decades, identified five main purposes of such surveys as, to provide:

- Diagnostic feedback for academics about the effectiveness of their teaching;
- A measure of teaching effectiveness for decisions regarding appointment and promotion, indeed in many European countries (from Norway to Portugal, and from Ireland to Poland) student evaluations form part of the staff appraisal system;
- Information for students to use in the selection of units of study and teachers;
- A component for use in quality assurance processes;
- Data for use in (institutional scientific) research.

We focus in this study, on the use in quality assurance processes, if only because it is a requirement of the external accrediting body in Ghana.

From an extensive review of the literature, Richardson (2005) concluded that student feedback surveys had the potential to provide valuable data for utilisation by students, academics and administrators. Oftentimes, however, the relevant authorities did not act on the data from such surveys and students were therefore, left in the dark as to the outcomes of their feedback. Indeed some authors (e.g. Cardoso & Machado dos Santos, 2011) argue that there is an apparent unwillingness by some institutions to share with students institutional issues such as the results of pedagogic questionnaires; this compromises student awareness and engagement.

Practical relevance would require developers of student evaluation surveys to pay attention to matters such as rationale, focus, content and design, fitness for purpose, importance of response rates, the intended use of the data to be collected and the dissemination of data to students. Richardson (2005) therefore, suggests, among others, that:

- Student evaluation surveys can be used both as evidence for assessing quality and for improving quality.
- Feedback should be sought at the level at which one is making attempts at monitoring quality.
- The focus should be on student perceptions of key aspects of teaching or on key aspects of the quality of their programmes.
- A 60 per cent response rate is desirable and achievable for students who have satisfactorily completed their course units or programmes.

It is, especially, Richardson's first suggestion (i.e. student evaluation surveys can be used both as evidence for assessing quality and for improving quality) that would be relevant to this study's quest for determining whether the Ghanaian accreditation procedure's measures had made any impact on students. Quality here may be defined as improvements in specified indicators beyond the accrediting body's set minimum standards, especially from one evaluation cycle to another.

Other facets of student feedback surveys have attracted the attention of many writers. For instance, Wiers-Jensen *et al.* (2002), Spooren & Mortelmans (2006), Driscoll & Cadden (2010), and Williams & Kane (2010), focused mainly on determinants of student satisfaction and potential biases.

Student responses, and their comments and expectations would hopefully, improve the toolkits of quality assurance agencies internationally to the ultimate benefit of this important segment of the knowledge acquisition venture – students.

Methodology

The study sought students' confirmation of the existence or the prevailing state of all indicators of evident, immediate relevance to students available in the instruments employed by the accrediting agency. The instruments – found on the agency's website, (www.nab.gov.gh) had been labelled as, Panel Evaluation Form and Accreditation Panel Reporting Form. The indicators, selected from the instruments were curriculum and course structure; course assessments; Student Assessment of Course Content and Teaching (SACT); academic staffing; physical facilities and library provisions.

Questionnaires administered to the selected students were designed, to get from students information about the state of affairs in the universities in these areas, in order to assess if actual study conditions conformed to the specifications required by the accrediting body. The students, most probably, did not previously know these requirements but the questionnaires provided them possible responses to select from. Thus, instead of asking students respondents directly whether a (programme in, for example, social science) class met the accreditation agency's requirement on class sizes, the questionnaire requested the student to indicate, from ranges of possible class sizes, what a typical programme's class size was. Again, to determine whether the set standards of the agency on libraries, for example, were being adhered to by the universities, students were requested to answer questions on access to textbooks, currency of the textbooks and improved access to online databases for learning and research work. We did this deliberately to prevent lack of candour in the students' responses for fear of eliciting a backlash – real or perceived - against their institutions in accreditation decisions. The selected students were from eleven universities in Ghana – the six oldest public and the five oldest private universities. These universities met the selection criteria of having a variety of programmes that had undergone, at least, two cycles of assessments for accreditation (an initial assessment and a subsequent one towards a renewal of the initial accreditation). They also ran similar programmes, from which the student respondents were selected, as at the year 2015 when the study was conducted. The study then compared the responses provided by students, offering similar courses and whenever possible, at the same graduation level, in the public and in the private universities. It had been planned initially to include students in the natural sciences and graduate programmes but too few of the private universities ran such programmes perhaps due to the high overhead costs involved. Graduate students and students of the natural sciences, mainly from the public universities, were therefore removed from the sample to make for a better comparison (i.e. with students offering similar courses at the undergraduate levels) of the private universities.

A thousand and one hundred (1,100) students were randomly selected from six (out of the nine) public universities and five (out of the 60) private universities in Ghana (Table 1). A breakdown of the response rates indicates 89 per cent of student responses from the public and 78 per cent of student responses from the private universities.

Insert Table 1

The sample constituted about 0.3 per cent of the total university population of about 350,000 in Ghana, about 70 per cent of whom were enrolled in the public universities. Six hundred and ninety-six (63 per cent) of the sampled students were from the public universities while 404 (37 per cent) of the students were enrolled in the private universities. These students were reading various taught programmes, at the bachelor's degree level, in the humanities and applied sciences (mainly Computer Science and Information Technology). Determination of the distribution of students sampled within the universities was motivated by the higher number of departments in the public as compared to that of the private universities. Aside from that consideration and since the main objective of the study was confirmation of the continued existence of conditions that led the regulatory body to grant accreditation to the institutions, factors such as the demographic make up of the sample was

not considered. The cardinal consideration was that student respondents ought to have enrolled, at least, during two assessments-for-accreditation, one cycle of assessment followed by a subsequent one. Thus the respondent students were in the final year of their four-year undergraduate studies.

It must be emphasized that since students did not directly participate in the assessment processes leading to the grant of accreditation in Ghana, what this study sought to do was to find out, albeit indirectly, from the students whether the agency's set minimum standards were being maintained by the universities. Students were assured of their anonymity in the study and the fact that the results were not meant to be relayed to the accrediting agency to exact any form of sanction on defaulting universities. The assurance was that the purposes of the study were for purely academic and research exercises.

The items on the questionnaire were structured to be independent of each other, with expected responses not dependent on that of a preceding question. This helped to develop a legitimate index function for the analysis of the responses. The areas covered were issues with regard to curriculum – course structure, student assessment, assessment of course content and teaching by students – ethics policy, class sizes, library and physical facilities.

Coding and Indexing of accreditation outcomes

As had been stated earlier, the items in the questionnaire mainly sought to determine whether certain requirements of the accreditation procedure were available in a university which would signify then, that the university was still complied with the initial measures that had earned it accreditation. Respondents were to provide either a 'Yes' (coded as 1) being the presence of an accreditation requirement or a 'No' (coded as 0) being the lack of a requirement, answers. Thus, for unidirectional questions, the sum of the 'Yeses' would determine the degree of compliance with that accreditation requirement. The items in Appendix one serve as an illustration of questions posed to students.

An indexing function was developed for some of the accreditation indicators (specifically, course structure, student feedback on assessment of course content and teaching - SACT, ethics policy, physical facilities and library), where several questions were asked about various aspects of the indicator. The indices show the number of items answered positively by each of the respondents normalised to the maximum possible number of questions in the scale) and they tersely indicate the compliance level. This approach to the analysis, compressed the volume of statistical results.

A distribution of the index values for the various factors showed that the score points were few. For instance, the library provision index had the following scores: 0, 0.33, 0.67 and 1.0 that may be treated as ranks; higher scores indicate better conformity with the accrediting body's stated standards. Statistical tests were mainly non-parametric, involving chi-square analysis and Mann-Whitney U Test.

Results

It must be emphasised, once more, that questionnaires designed for the sampled students were not meant to elicit direct responses as to whether their respective institutions were fulfilling accreditation requirements. They were, in the main, requested to confirm, or deny, the existence of those requirements – which were provided as possible answers to the questions asked in their institutions. It must also be clarified that the students were not requested to confirm the existence of all the requirements of the accrediting body. The students were asked to confirm only those requirements that directly had a bearing on their teaching and learning experiences. Thus, questions relating to the finances of the institutions, for instance, were not asked. When it came to ethics policy, questions asked related to whether a document on that existed in the first place and whether to their knowledge critical

issues on matters such as staff–student relationships, student–student relationships and research and plagiarism (for instance) had been addressed by such a policy document.

Curriculum issues

Questionnaires administered to the students solicited responses on the following issues with regard to the accreditation procedure’s requirements on the curriculum:

- (i) Provision of course outlines to the students at the onset of the academic session,
- (ii) Conformity of the structure of course outlines with the recommended format,
- (iii) Inclusion of compulsory institution-wide courses such as communication skills and computer applications in the various programmes of study and
- (iv) Appropriate allocation of credits within the prescribed standards.

Responses from the sampled students, from both public and private universities, were unanimous that their institutions had provided them with course outlines at the beginning of the academic session. On conformity with the prescribed format for course outlines, students’ responses from the private universities indicated a higher compliance rate (641.68) than those from the public universities (496.92) (Table 2). Using the Mann-Whitney U test, compliance level among private universities was significantly higher than that in the public universities ($U=103298$, $p<.01$).

All the students sampled, from both university types, indicated their respective institutions’ compliance with the accrediting body’s requirement that they offer prescribed university-wide courses in areas such as computer applications and good writing skills. Seventy-four per cent of students from the public universities indicated an average of three credit hours for such mandatory courses but proportionately more private university students (83 per cent) gave the same number of (3) credit hours (Table 2). The student responses showed a significant relationship ($\chi^2= 11.59$, $p=.001$) between their type of university – public or private and the allotted credits for the compulsory university-wide courses.

The relationship between the type of university and the assignment of mandatory courses, such as communication skills, to students was significant ($\chi^2= 112.01$, $p<.001$): 82 per cent of students from the public universities undertook such courses as add-on to their regular programmes of study while 51 per cent of their counterparts in the private universities did the same. There is therefore a significant difference between the responses from the public as against the private students.

Insert Table 2

Student Assessment policy

The Ghanaian accrediting body required institutions it regulated to adopt both formative and summative assessments for students enrolled on their programmes. The sampled students – from both public and private universities indicated that their institutions conducted continuous assessments in the course of their studies. They also had to write end-of-semester examinations, thus confirming compliance with the accrediting procedure’s requirement for formative and summative assessments of students.

In respect of examination coverage, 19 per cent of students, from both types of institutions, indicated that there was complete coverage of all topics in the course outline all the time while 70 per cent indicated that was most often the case. Proportionally, more students from the private universities (34 per cent approximately) than the public universities (almost 11 per cent) indicated that their examinations covered almost all topics in the provided course outline (Table 3). However, over 80 per cent of the sampled public university students, as against over 57 per cent from the private universities responded that the course outlines ‘most often’ covered all topics (Table 3). The third category of answers

was that only about half of the courses included all topics from the course outline in examinations. There was thus a statistical association between the types of institutions and the responses from their students on examination coverage in relation to the provided course

outlines - $\chi^2 = 98.22, p < .001$ – (Table 3). On the issue of providing feedback on student assessments, only a third of students, overall, indicated that their respective institutions did this. Relatively, more students (56%) in the private universities indicated receiving feedback from their institutions as compared to 16% of students from the public universities (Table 3).

Insert Table 3

Student assessment of course content and teaching (SACT)

The accreditation procedure in Ghana required universities to ensure that, at least at the end of each semester, students evaluated the contents of courses they pursued and their experiences with regard to teaching delivery, among others. Questions asked to the sampled students in this regard were to elicit responses as to whether the universities had complied with this requirement by, for instance, requesting periodic completion of student evaluation forms on course contents and teaching delivery. Other items on the questionnaire included those requesting responses on which outfit (academic or administrative) exercised responsibility for the administration of the process and the implementation of recommendations arising therefrom, as well as receipt and address of complaints. The scores for the student assessment of courses and teaching (SACT) index suggested better conformity with the requirements by the private universities (528.5) than the public universities (488.4) (Table 4). Statistically, from the students' responses, it can be deduced that private universities complied better with SACT requirement than the public universities ($U = 112310, p = 0.026 < 0.05$).

Issues on the mode of administration of the SACT requirement (e.g. manually or electronically) and the skewness of the SACT form (in favour of course content or that of teaching or balanced between the two) were explored. The results showed that a significant number of the sampled public university students (about 79 per cent) – marginally, more than

the 73 per cent from the private universities – completed the SACT forms manually - $\chi^2 = 4.24, p = .039 < .05$ (Table 4).

The SACT form was generally seen as balanced in the quest for the evaluation of both course content and teaching delivery. Approximately 71 per cent of the sampled public university students as against 27 per cent of those from the private universities indicated such balance (Table 4). Private universities therefore complied better with the requirement for completion of SACT forms by students while a better balance of questions in those forms was provided by the public universities. Almost half of the students from the private universities indicated that the SACT evaluation form was mostly geared towards assessment of teaching delivery; only 13 per cent of the sampled public university students shared the same opinion. The relationship between the responses and the type of universities was thus

significant - $\chi^2 = 201.11, p < .01$ (Table 4).

Insert Table 4

Education conditions: Ethics and facilities

The main requirements of the accrediting body that related to students' teaching and learning experiences and on which the study requested responses from the students were ethics policy, physical facilities and library facilities.

The Ghanaian accrediting body required the institutions they regulated to document ethics policies for their staff and students, which provided for acceptable behaviour in their institutions. Highlights of those policies included those, which should regulate staff–student relations, student–student relation, research ethics, plagiarism, etc.

Responses from students in the public universities indicated high fulfilment of the requirement on ethics policy (572.99) in comparison to responses from their private university counterparts (511.76) (Table 5). The Mann-Whitney U test indicated a significant difference in the levels of compliance with the ethics policy depending on the type of university – public or private – attended ($U=124941$, $p=.001<.01$). Institutions that had complied with the provision for an ethics policy generally distributed the document to their students after orientation programmes at the beginning of the academic year or had them on the institution’s website for the information of students and other stakeholders.

With physical facilities, the mean ranks for the public and private universities (651.28 and 376.88 respectively) suggest higher compliance by the public universities and this was statistically significant ($U=70450.5$, $p=.000<.01$). Thus, the inference from the students’ responses was that the physical facilities in the public universities conformed better to the accrediting body’s requirements, as specified in the evaluation instruments, than those in the private universities. The physical facility requirements included availability of technical equipment for teaching and demonstration, adequacy and safety of classroom and other spaces earmarked for students’ use and accessibility of the facilities to the physically challenged. Also included in the physical facility requirements were office spaces for academic staff where they could interact with students requiring academic and counselling services outside normal class hours.

Student responses on the library facilities indicated better and significant compliance levels of the accrediting body’s requirements by the public universities (407.21) than the private universities (365.83) ($U=64974$, $p=.006<.01$) – (Table 5). The accreditation requirements for library facilities included availability and adequacy of library space, currency of textbooks and journals and provision of equipment such as computers and reprographic equipment.

Insert Table 5

Class sizes

The questionnaire on this indicator requested students to provide responses on the largest and the smallest class sizes they had sat in during the semester immediately preceding the research period. We should take note that full-time students who participated in the survey took six courses each within the semester. The class sizes computed from the figures provided from the student responses suggested a range of 80 – 240 students per class for the Business courses in the public universities. These were higher than the corresponding ranges of 54 – 179 students per class for similar courses in the private universities within the same period. In the other humanities, average class sizes ranged between 52 – 274 students per class for the public universities while corresponding figures for the private universities ranged between 31 – 146 students per class indicating bigger class sizes for the public universities. The situation, with regard to class sizes was not different between the two types of universities in the applied sciences (Table 6).

We could see from the table below that generally, private universities had lower class sizes than the public universities.

Insert Table 6

Discussion of results

Comparative student responses from both types of universities show highest compliance levels of the accrediting body’s requirements in the areas of good physical and library facilities by the public universities while class sizes in the private universities follow in those rankings.

The reasons for the better compliance rates by the public universities with the physical facilities requirements are not hard to determine. Unlike their private university counterparts, almost all the public universities had their purpose-built facilities, often modelled after other world class universities, put up by the state which also made annual budgetary provisions,

even if inadequate, for their maintenance. The private universities, many of which had started from rented facilities, were now struggling to construct their own facilities with funds, mainly from loans and student fees. With their relatively excellent facilities and reputation, many students preferred to enrol in the public universities rather than the private universities most of which had to be literally cajoled to move into their permanent structures, by the accrediting agency, if they wanted to maintain their accreditation.

The same reason, as per the physical facilities above, held for the provision of library facilities, the results from the student respondents of which indicated a proportionately higher compliance rate with the required standards by the public universities than the private ones. With state support, the public universities were not only in a better position to replenish their stocks of equipment and textbooks with current ones, but were also able to keep abreast with subscriptions of current and relevant journals for their programmes ahead of the private universities.

With regard to class sizes, Materu (2007, p.31) had alluded to the likelihood of African public universities allowing ‘trade-offs in quality to accommodate the social demand for access and to offset the effects of reduced funding from governments’, as a major reason for the larger than normal enrolments, resulting in large class sizes in the public universities. It should be noted that this phenomenon preceded the establishment of most African accrediting bodies, including the Ghanaian agency. Although the regulatory bodies were doing their best to bring down the large class sizes to acceptable levels, the socio-economic pressures prevailing in these countries were likely to prevent rapid results in that regard. With respect to wielding the big stick on the maintenance of optimum class sizes, it would appear that the accreditation procedure was harder on the private universities than it was with the public universities. The socio-political pressure exerted on the public universities to admit more student numbers than their existing facilities could optimally handle appeared to be immense. Many African governments counted as part of their achievements, increases in the placement of qualified applicants in the universities, especially the state-funded ones, although they could not always provide the needed resources to support such universities to achieve that objective. With relatively cheaper fees, the general public saw the admission of their wards to the public universities as a right; after all, those institutions subsisted on taxes from the public. Such factors, among others, conspired to exert greater pressure on the state-funded universities to exceed the officially sanctioned class sizes, perhaps with the unofficial connivance of the regulatory body.

Unlike the public universities, the private ones have had to obtain accreditation from the onset before commencing operations. Harvey & Newton (2005) had listed control and compliance as two of the four purposes cited for quality assurance. It was obvious that the accrediting body had been applying the two measures scrupulously on the private universities in order for them to retain their accreditation and this perhaps accounted for their relatively smaller class sizes than the public universities.

Responses from the students to the administered questionnaires confirmed, in overall terms, conformity with the curriculum requirements (excluding the mandatory courses) by both the public and private universities, with the latter indicating better conformity levels. Assessment of curricula by evaluators was one of the key exercises by the accrediting agency in the determination of the grant of accreditation to Ghanaian universities. Private universities essentially, underwent a two-tier evaluation process – one by its mentoring university and the other by the accrediting agency – while the public ones underwent only one, by the agency. This, perhaps, accounted for the better performance of the private universities, if the student responses indeed reflected the real situation.

The student responses on the requirements for assessments showed, on the face of it, that more students from the public universities indicated higher rates of conformity with the

accrediting body's requirements than those of the private universities, although responses from the private university students appeared more consistent. Note must be taken of the fact that the public universities had been operating with better structures and more qualified and experienced staff for some time before private provision was permitted, in the 1990s. On the other hand, the private universities were still struggling, with weak structures and relatively inexperienced academic staff, to cope with the standards set by the accrediting body.

Students from both types of universities reported compliance with the requirement for student evaluations of teaching and course contents. Those from the public universities indicated a better balance between questions posed on issues of course contents and teaching, than students from the private universities. We take note of the fact that previous researchers had been sceptical about student evaluations on this subject, within the universities. As explained in the introductory part of this article, student respondents were made aware that there could be no benefits for not been candid in their responses, as the researchers had nothing to do with any such expectations. The explanation proffered for the differences in responses between the public and private university students, with respect to their views on student assessments, also held for that on the structure of questionnaires for internal student evaluations on course content and teaching.

An analysis of the responses from students from the public universities indicated better compliance by their institutions with the requirement for an ethics policy as against their private university counterparts. This significant compliance rate by the public universities could be attributed to their long assimilation of the practice, first from mentoring institutions – from colonial times – and lately from normative cultural contacts. The latter would include attendance at conferences and interactions with external examiners, during which they might have shared views on quality and best practices. Secondly, public universities in Ghana see themselves as comparable with other world-class universities such as Oxford University and Harvard University in the United Kingdom and the United States respectively. Institution of ethics policies had thus become part of the general operations of the public universities just like counterpart higher education institutions in other parts of the world. They were therefore, more likely to adopt policies that would at least sustain them in that position than their relatively unknown private counterparts which were in their infancy, as far as imbibing those virtues were concerned.

Conclusion

We recognize that students may not be experts in curriculum design or many of the other indicators on which they had to provide their views in the form of responses to questionnaires. It might seem inappropriate, therefore to request them to confirm whether curricula for particular courses, for instance, conformed to desired standards or not. It is quite valid, however, to ask students about their experiences of quality education restricted to the existence of particular requirements as stated in the accrediting body's instruments for assessments.

The students' responses, from both types of institutions, show varying degrees, of conformity and/or compliance with the Ghanaian accrediting agency's requirements. Private universities were more compliant with regard to formalities around the curriculum (advance course information, student feedback forms) though the course outlines students received in public universities covered the topics better. Regarding general competence in the curriculum, the picture was mixed: private universities provided more Information Technology and writing but public universities do more on communication. Facilities in public universities were better, apart from overcrowded class sizes.

This conclusion may not come as a surprise, especially for the public universities. Many of these public universities, especially the older ones, whose establishment predated that of the

accrediting body, had self-regulatory structures which had been replicated from institutions that had mentored them in their formative years. The public universities also participate in many normative cultural exchanges with foreign counterparts and related agencies. Thus, they were already used to, and were compliant with most of the external regulatory agency's requirements. This situation, perhaps partially accounted for the differences in conformity and/or compliance with the accrediting body's requirements by the two different types of universities in Ghana, as indicated by the respective student responses.

Two main limitations might have affected the results of the study. First is the late start in the application of accreditation measures in the public universities due to the priority given to the assessments for the establishment of private universities, which was a new development in Ghana. What this meant was that, at the time of the study only two cycles of assessments for accreditation had been carried out, and only for some of the academic programmes, in the old public universities. The second limitation lay in the very limited number of academic programmes ran by the private universities at the time of the study. This affected a broader and, perhaps a better comparative study between the public and private universities with regard to the students' responses on the accreditation requirements.

With the introduction of many more academic programmes lately by both types of universities a future replication of the study should produce more interesting results. In such a future study, the questionnaire may be so designed as to seek better students' perspectives on the effectiveness of pedagogical issues on students' learning experiences.

Secondly, it is recommended that universities involve students more in quality assurance issues as part of a deep-seated institutional culture rather than, or in addition to, the end-of-academic session student evaluations that appear to be enforced only to satisfy set rituals. Towards that objective, it is recommended that students be vigorously educated by both the universities and the regulatory body about the accrediting body's requirements of the institutions. This would enable the students to provide a more informed feedback on how measures designed to assure quality delivery in the universities are achieving the desired impact, especially as they relate to the students.

The accrediting body may also wish to seek student feedback on how its measures are making impact on the students' learning experience in a more systematic and frequent manner in order to factor them in, and improve the body's assessment instruments for ensuring quality improvement in the universities. Formal communication avenues between students and the accrediting agency must also be instituted by the latter to inform students periodically on measures put in place to address their legitimate concerns and to ensure that they are not been short-changed, in terms of quality provision of higher education, by providers.

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