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## **Evaluating Knowledge of Quality Assurance Practices in Tertiary Institutions in Ghana**

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### ***Abstract:***

*Tertiary education assumes greater importance as it generates knowledge, the key engine of global economy and development. One way to guarantee this is constant and efficient assurance of high standards is the setting up of quality assurance agencies to coordinate the proper development of such institutions. This study seeks to evaluate the knowledge of Quality Assurance practices in Accra Polytechnic. A Cross-Sectional Descriptive Study approach was used. A total of 50 respondents were sampled and 43 responses received, 26 from the administrative units (non-teaching) and 17 from the schools (teaching staff). The study data was collected using self-administered questionnaires divided into three sections. Accreditation, assessment, academic audit and examination were some of the approaches of QA known and practiced averagely by the institution. The mostly used or known quality assessment is action taken on students' feedback. Staff expertise and initiative were seen as very essential in improving quality in the polytechnic. A gap between policy formulation and implementation was realized due to poor communication. The introduction of the QA system was done by the institutional leadership with little involvement of staff. Almost all the learning resources are available but inadequate. The most available procedure to ensure quality research is internal seminars. Inadequate qualified staff in the quality assurance unit and lack of commitment by management were the challenges regarding effective implementation of internal quality assurance system in the institution. Knowledge on QA practices is average in the institution.*

**Keywords:** *Quality assurance, knowledge, practices, accreditation, assessment*

### **1. Introduction**

Tertiary education institutions have over the generations played pivotal roles in the development of nations. In the twenty first century, tertiary education has assumed even greater importance as it generates knowledge, the key engine of global economy and development. Many countries have discovered the critical importance of tertiary education and therefore invest great attention and resources into it. One way to guarantee that tertiary education is sensitive to national situations and offers value-for-money education is to constantly and efficiently assure high standards in the provisions of the institutions that deliver tertiary education. To formally achieve this, a number of tertiary education institutions have set up internal systems that ensure services provided are of best practices and meet the international standard. Countries have set up National Quality Assurance Agencies to coordinate the proper development of such institutions, to ensure high standards in the provision of tertiary education so that programmes are offered in a siren environment, using the best human and physical resources.

Over time, these issues have become central to tertiary education, and quality assurance has assumed prominence nationally and globally in tertiary education. Different quality assurance practices have attracted attention all over the world. As students and staff move from one country and continent to another, the issues of transferability of grades and comparability of certificates have become major problem on the comparability of provisions and standards. Consequently, many tertiary education institutions have set up quality assurance department/units to ensure that quality is a key consideration in all their services. In Ghana, the National Accreditation Board in charge of accreditation of tertiary education had given a directive for all tertiary institutions to have Internal Quality Assurance Department as one of the requirements for accreditation and re-accreditation of institutions and programmes. Quality Assurance unit was established in Accra Polytechnic in 2009, i.e. seventeen years after the institution gained tertiary status, at that time it was under the planning department of the polytechnic. It was de-coupled from the planning department to stand as a department on its own in 2011. Before 2009, the institution had various policies and documents such as the NABPTEX handbook, Students handbook, Examination rules and regulations, etc., for ensuring academic quality. It can therefore be said that the concept of Quality Assurance (QA) in its holistic form is fairly new in Accra Polytechnic, taking cognizance of the fact that the institution has been a tertiary one since 1992. It is therefore necessary to determine the knowledge on QA practices in the institution in order to devise appropriate strategies to equip the Polytechnic community to fully implement QA. This is what this study seeks to evaluate.

Quality in tertiary education has been given increasing prominence by governments throughout the world since 1980's. Frazer (1992) argued that the quality of tertiary education had become increasingly important because of the growing belief that human capital was central to a nation's engagement in the competitive world environment. The products of the system whether they are graduates or research, impact directly on the performance and success of both commercial and public organization. Looking into the future, the United Nations has placed the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at the top of the global development agenda, (UN,2006) the goal of the MDGs is to halve world poverty by 2015. Jonathan (2000), pointed out that the quality of tertiary education institutions and their academic programmes have always been regarded and will continue to be regarded, as an indispensable tool in the growth and development of all countries in the new millennium. The role of tertiary education in Africa, including its quality assurance, for the realization of the MDGs has been stressed by UNESCO, the commonwealth of Learning and other partners and organizations. Thus, quality tertiary education is considered important for the attainment of the MDGs. As noted by Bloom, Canning and Chan (2006), tertiary education is now recognized as a major driving force of social and economic development, it plays a key role in supporting poverty reduction and being responsive to a changing labour market. Ghana encountered a number of changes in its tertiary education environment during the 1980s, which include quality change in relationship between the government and tertiary education institutions. The quality of tertiary education and its improvement has always been an issue of high priority for both the government and higher institutions in Ghana. The government of Ghana responded to the unfavourable situation by establishing a national quality assurance agency to be responsible for quality assurance in higher education.

According to the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FHEEC, 2008) "quality assurance means the procedures, processes and systems used by the tertiary education institution to manage and improve the quality of its education and other activities". Thus quality assurance implies a system by which a tertiary educational institution confirms that it has adequate conditions or provisions in place to enable students to achieve the set standards. Other writers, such as Vroeijenstin (1995) also emphasize the dual notions of maintenance and enhancement, Vroeijenstin further notes that quality assurance requires formalized structures and continuous attention. Lomas (2002) adds the view that attention to the maintenance and improvement of standards is important because of the need for higher education to have relevance for students, employers and financiers. Girdwood and Bramley (1997) advised that quality assurance should never be something which is done once and then put aside; rather it requires a continuous process of checking. It should be noted that quality assurance may relate to a programme, an institution or a whole higher institution system. Hence Quality assurance has been described as:

All of those attitudes, objects, actions, and procedures which, through their existence and use, and together with the quality control activities, ensure that appropriate academic standards are being maintained and enhanced in and by the programme, institution or system, and make this known to the educational community and the public at large (Woodhouse, 1999).

There are various approaches to quality assurance such as accreditation, assessment, academic audit and external examination.

Accreditation is an evaluation by an authorized body of whether an institution or an educational programme qualifies for a certain status (Brennan and Shah, 2000a). Harvey 2004, argues that, accreditation is more about minimum standards than about the quality of the process. The accreditation decision is frequently based on the results of an evaluation process. Quality assurance and accreditation have, therefore, become key issues for tertiary education internationally since the late 1980s (see, for example, Craft, 1992, 1994; Kells, 1992; and Mok, 2000). The result has influenced both structural provisions and appointments. New structures have been created nationally and many institutions have responded with the establishment of managerial positions focusing on educational quality.

Quality Audit is concerned with processes and procedures. It is the "systematic and independent examination to determine whether quality activities and related results comply with planned arrangements and whether these arrangements are implemented effectively and are suitable to achieve objectives" (BIS, 1988). The process involves a systematic review of the quality assurance mechanisms of an institution to ensure that they are comprehensive enough to achieve their purposes. In brief, it is a check to see whether the institution is fit for its stated purpose. Quality audit is an attempt to verify the extent to which the institution is fulfilling its own objectives (Woodhouse, 1999). It checks the extent to which the institution is achieving its own explicit or implicit objectives. Hall (2007) notes that most quality audit processes attempt to prod institutions into self-evaluation and enhancement, the belief being that the hallmark of a quality organization is its ability to self-assess its own strengths and weaknesses and to take corrective action. It should be noted that if quality audit is well applied in an institution, it will assist in quality improvement. This is because audit does not set any external standards against which to judge the institution. Its outcome does not involve a pass or fail decision, but rather assessing an institution on its own terms and against its own objectives.

Self-assessment is the on-going process through which tertiary education organizations evaluate their own performance, identify strengths and areas for improvement, and make the necessary improvements overtime. It should be clearly focused, with priority given to areas the institution considers crucial to achieving better education outcomes.

The use of external examiners in moderating the examinations of an institution is yet another form of quality assurance process in higher education. The external examination system is not a new approach to quality assurance in higher education. It is well established in tertiary education for a long time (Lewis, 2005). Eva (2005b) and Brandt and Stensaker (2005) maintain that external examination systems are still in vogue and seem to be recognized as an effective means of ensuring the quality of education provided in those tertiary education systems in which it is found.

Giving reason for its continuous application, Stensaker et al., (2008, p. 213) argue that this can be related to the two basic purposes of external examiners systems, i.e., to: "ensure that degrees awarded by different institutions are comparable with respect to (national) academic standards; and treat students fairly ensuring a certain distance between teachers and those who assess their achievements".

Lewis (2005) noted that one major benefit of the external examiner system has been its contribution to the spread of what is considered good practice among institutions and thereby facilitate shared practices between institutions. Academics gain considerably from this exercise by relating and sharing information with their colleagues in the same discipline.

## 2. Methodology

A Cross-Sectional Descriptive Study approach was used which involved a one-time survey of a sample of employees of Accra Polytechnic. Cross-sectional studies, also known as surveys, are a useful way to gather information on important aspects of people's knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, practices and beliefs in relation to a particular situation (Last, 2003). The results from these surveys not only give an indication of the magnitude of the problem in a particular population at a particular point in time, but also provide a basis for designing appropriate remedies. It was a mixed research comprising a descriptive qualitative procedure and a quantitative procedure. Qualitatively, information would be obtained from responses emanating from interviews with members of the polytechnic. The Polytechnic consists of three schools and 12 administrative departments which are Finance, Procurement, Estate, Internal Audit, Computer, Academic Affairs, Rector's Office, Planning, Human Resource, Transport, Stores and Alumni. The schools are school of Engineering, Business Studies and Applied Sciences.

### 2.1. Sample and Sampling Procedure

A stratified random sampling was used to ensure that every department within the organization is represented. This method of random sampling was used because the population of interest is heterogeneous in nature and therefore there is the need to reduce the probable errors by obtaining a larger measure of the representation (Babbie 1999).

A sample of workers was obtained by assigning random codes to members on the staff list and then sorting the list according to the codes with Microsoft Excel.

Fifty respondent recruited were spread across the three schools and administration in direct proportionality. A total of 50 respondents were sampled; 30 from the administrative units and 20 from the three schools. At the end of the survey 43 responses were received, 26 from the administrative units (non-teaching) and 17 from the schools (teaching staff).

### 2.2. Instrument

The study data was collected using self-administered questionnaires divided into three sections. Section one contained relevant questions on socio-demographic characteristics, the second part had a list of factors comprising knowledge, practices and attitude of quality assurance in the institution. The third section featured the factors again but this time for respondents to tick the topmost five in preference of importance. The questions were both open ended and closed- ended, also including were multiple choice question and checklist with an option of a free response when such responses are not in the checklist.

Demographic characteristics captured in the study are gender, age, occupational classification, and number of years working continuously with the Polytechnic.

The questions were pretested using 10 members of staff from the school of applied Sciences and Arts to make sure that they would elicit the required information from the sample.

### 2.3. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed personally to the subjects. In some instances, the accuracy and honesty of responses were verified by interacting face to face with the respondents.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

The frequencies of responses to various questions were converted into percentages to be used for analysing and discussing the results. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was the software used in the analyses.

## 3. Results and Discussions

A total of 50 workers participated in the study and 43 completed the survey, giving a response rate of 86%. Table 1 presents information on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	26	60.5
Female	17	39.5
<b>Category of Staff</b>		
Teaching	17	39.5
Non-Teaching	26	60.5
<b>Status of Respondents</b>		
Junior Staff	3	7.0
Senior Staff	14	32.6
Senior Member (Teaching)	18	41.9
Senior member (Non-Teaching)	8	18.6

Table 1: Respondents Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics

More than half of the respondents (60.5%) were from the non-teaching category where 56%, 32.0% and 12.0% senior staff, senior members and junior staff respectively, while 39.50% were teaching staff.

The highest qualification of respondents was 62.80% for second degree, 23.30% for first degree and the least qualification of 2.30% was WASSCE/SSCE.

Years served	Frequency	Percent
1 - 5 years	22	51.2
6 - 10 years	10	23.3
11 - 15 years	4	9.3
16 - 20 years	5	11.6
21 years and above	2	4.7
Total	43	100.0

Table 2: Number of years served in the institution

Number of years served in the institution ranged from 1 to 21 years, the majority of the respondents (51.40%) had served between 1 and 5 years.

	Frequency	Percent
Valid		
Agreed	37	86.0
Disagreed	6	14.0
Total	43	100.0

Table 3: Quality assurance defined

The overall responds to the agreed definition of Quality Assurance was (37) 86.0%. looking at the responds in terms of category of staff, 70.6% of the teaching staff and 96.2% of non-teaching staff agreed to the definition of Quality assurance as “the systems used by a tertiary educational institution to safeguard and improve the quality of its education and other activities”. As defined by Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FHEEC, 2008) “quality assurance means the procedures, processes and systems used by the tertiary education institution to manage and improve the quality of its education and other activities”. The high percentage of both teaching and non-teaching staff agreeing to the general definition of Quality Assurance indicate that the polytechnic community understand quality assurance concept. Accra polytechnic’s quality assurance statement is known by 83.7% of the respondents, the remaining 16.3% have no idea about the statement.

Approaches	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Accreditation is known and practiced	21	27.6%	65.6%
Assessment (Students, Lecturers) is known and practiced	18	23.7%	56.2%
Academic Audit is known and practiced	21	27.6%	65.6%
Examinations is known and practiced	16	21.1%	50.0%
Total	76	100.0%	237.5%

Table 4: Approaches of QA known and practiced

Accreditation is one of the quality assurance approaches known and practiced by the institution says 27.6% of the respondents as well as academic audit. This is followed by assessment of students and lecturers having 23.7% with the remaining 21.1% being for examinations. This indicates that four main approaches in QA are averagely known and practiced by the Polytechnic.

What is the nature of quality practices process in the institution? Please choose all applicable options	Responses in percentages
It involves Management	69.40%
It involves Senior Members (Academic)	77.80%
Senior Members (Non-Academic)	41.70%
Senior staff	36.10%
Junior staff	16.70%
Students	58.30%

Table 5: Nature of quality practices process in the institution

With regards to quality practices process in the institution, 77.80% of the respondents believe it involves Senior member’s academic, management (69.40%), then students 58.30%. the category that was least involved is the junior staff, 16.70%. thus, the junior staff were seen as not being involved in quality assurance practices in the institution.

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very consistent	7	16.3	16.3
	consistent	15	34.9	51.2
	not consistent	10	23.3	74.4
	no response	11	25.6	100.0
	Total	43	100.0	

Table 6: Institutions mission and core values

The mission and core values of the institution appears to be half-way, 51.20%, in terms of achieving consistency.

How was quality assurance system introduced in your institution? Please choose all applicable options	
Institutional Leadership	64.30%
Academic staff	17.90%
Academic and administrative staff	17.90%
Academic, administrative staff and Students	17.90%
Government bodies in charge of tertiary institutions	35.70%

Table 7: Introduction of QA system in the Institution

The respondents, 64.30%, believe that institutional leadership decided on the concept, provided instructions, training and support to the unit for implementation, whiles 35.70% of all the respondents see the introduction of the concept by government bodies in charge of tertiary institutions. The involvement of staff in the introduction of the system was seen to be very low, 17.90%.

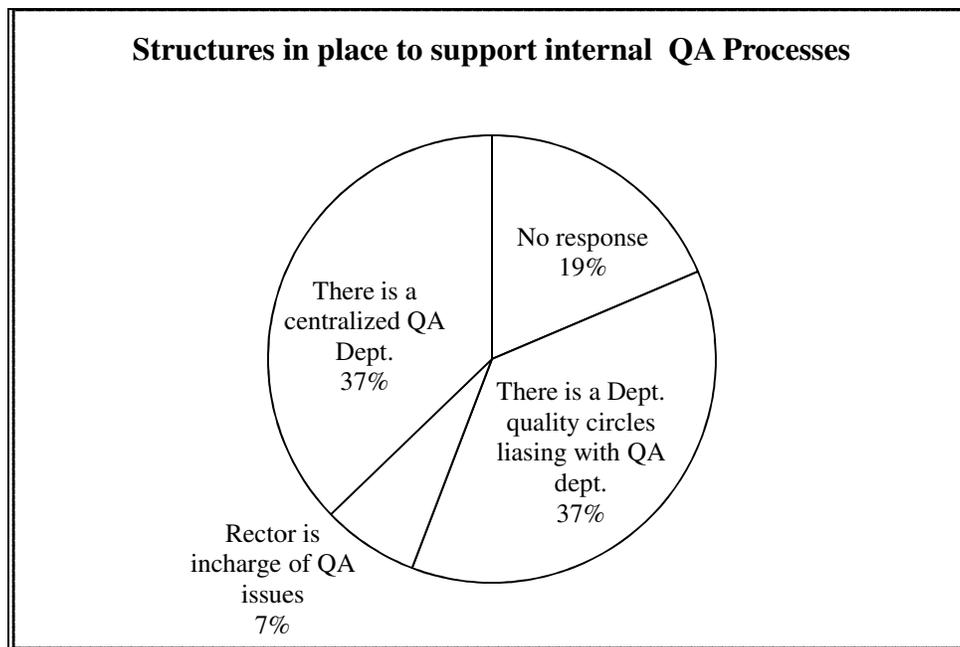


Figure 1: Support for internal Quality Assurance processes

The figure on support for internal QA processes revealed that, there is a department solely for ensuring Quality in the institution and also has quality circles at the departmental levels for effective monitoring.

Publicly available information, please choose all applicable options.	
Number of students on a programme	27.90%
Number of academic staff	23.30%
Student teacher ratio	7.0%
Learning outcomes	20.90%
Qualifications granted by the programme	44.20%
Teaching learning and assessment procedures	18.60%
Learning opportunities available to the students	16.30%
Alumni employment	9.30%

Table 8: Publicly available information

Publicly available information of the institution includes qualifications granted by the programme (44.20%), number of academic staff (23.30%), learning outcomes (20.90%) and the least is student teacher ratio, 7.0%. Table 18 depicts these responses.

The following challenges were mentioned regarding effective implementation of internal quality assurance system in the institution:

- Inadequate qualified staff in the quality assurance unit
- Lack of commitment by management
- Lack of resources and facilities
- Lack of information (both Staff and Students)
- There should be no interference from management

#### 4. Conclusion

This study seeks to evaluate the knowledge of Quality Assurance practices in Accra Polytechnic.

In conclusion, most members of staff know about the definition of QA. Accreditation, assessment, academic audit and examination were some of the approaches of QA known and practiced averagely by the institution. With respect to quality assessment, the mostly used or known means is action taken on students' feedback. Staff expertise and initiative were seen as very essential in improving quality in the polytechnic. From the study, the junior staff were the least involved in quality assurance practices. To improve quality teaching and learning was monitored through the use of assessment form, student survey and routine visits during lecture hours. The mission and core values of the institution are averagely achieved consistently. QA practices have improved teaching and learning while its impact on organization and management is not felt. A gap between policy formulation and implementation was realized with the reason being poor communication and there exist no known consistent policy and implementation strategy. The introduction of the QA system was done by the institutional leadership with little involvement of staff. Almost all the learning resources are available but inadequate. The most available procedure to ensure quality research is internal seminars to discuss research projects and ideas. The effective implementation of internal quality assurance system in the institution was not without challenges.

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