

## Assessing Internal Quality Assurance Mechanisms at Selected Private Universities in Ghana

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**ABSTRACT:** *The early 1990s saw a new phenomenon emerge in Ghana – it was the beginning of private higher education following the deregulation of the higher education sector. Since then, there has been an upsurge in growth and currently, there are 118 private universities dotted around the country. Although the emergence has increased access to higher education, it has presented concerns about the compromise of quality and standards in the sector. The aim of the study was to evaluate the internal quality assurance processes at selected private universities in Ghana with the view to developing a quality assurance model for the higher education sector. Using mixed qualitative research methodologies, the key findings were that the existing internal quality assurance practices focused mainly on planning and implementing the plan. The study concluded that there was a need for private universities to strengthen monitoring and evaluation, data collection, acting on feedback and benchmarking tools.*

**KEYWORDS:** higher education, Ghana, quality assurance, private universities, internal quality assurance, private higher education, quality.

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### INTRODUCTION

In Ghana, the past thirty years have seen a rapid growth of private universities. This is a phenomenon that has been witnessed in other sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. Tamrat (2018) argues that the growth is both driven by a high demand for higher education that could not be met by the public sector and foreign policy influences such as the World Bank's Structural Adjustment programmes that favoured privatization in sub-Saharan African countries in the 1980s and beyond. While there has been a global surge in private higher education, that of Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries has been described with words and phrases like 'phenomenal', 'sprung up like mushrooms', 'dramatic and particularly striking' due to the rapidity of its growth in the last decade (Lau and Yuen 2010, Sawyer 2004). In Ghana, the rate of growth of private universities has been remarkable as shown in the figure below.

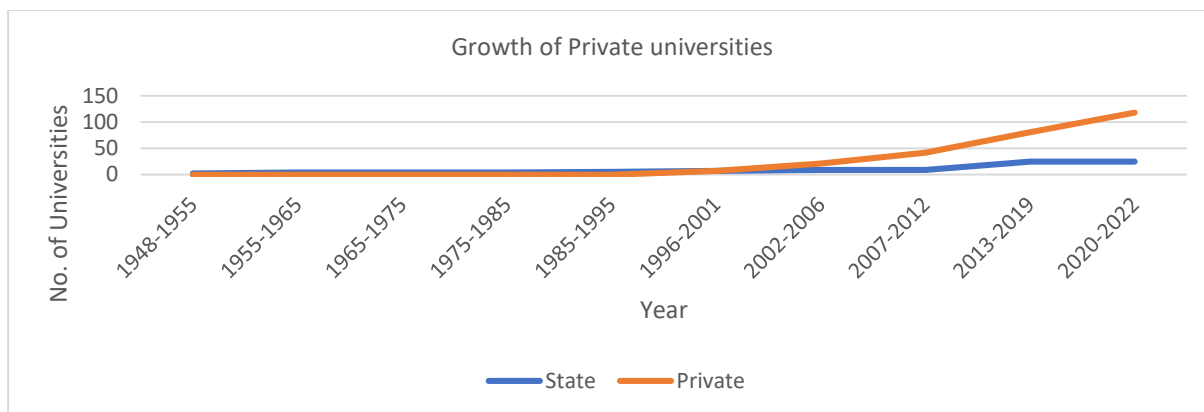


Fig. 1 Source: [GTEC | Accredited Institutions/](#)

With no private universities in 1990, the number of private universities had grown exponentially to forty-four by 2012. In a space of six years, the number of private universities had almost doubled to eighty-one by 2018. Currently, Ghana has 118 private universities – an indication that 82% of universities in Ghana are privately-owned. This development has transformed the higher education landscape in Ghana from being predominantly public to being outnumbered by private universities.

Globally, the rapid growth of private universities has brought with it various concerns including the commodification of knowledge, abdication of state responsibility, exclusion of students from low socio-economic background, changing the ethos, curriculum and values of higher education and the compromise of quality and standards (Morley, 2013). While all these concerns are present in the private higher sector, there is no concern that is more threatening than the compromise of quality. The case of Ghana has come with excitement but also major concerns about the compromise of quality and standards. Despite the growing concern, there is a paucity of research on evaluating how quality is assured and implemented in the private higher education sector. Recent studies (Ayam 2020, Pon & Schendel 2020) have focused on the impact of governance and regulatory framework and explored the process of teaching and learning in higher education. Although governance, teaching and learning are parts of quality dimensions, these studies did not focus on how these dimensions were quality assured. This article, therefore, is of interest as it is specific to the private higher education sector and initiates a new debate on how quality is assured in this sector. The objective of the study was to explore and evaluate how quality assurance is implemented in selected private universities in Ghana. Subsequently, the major contribution made by the study was the modelling of a quality assurance framework that incorporates the deficiencies emanated from the study.

The article proceeds with the problem statement and then reviews the literature which explores the key conceptualisations of the internal quality assurance implementation process and leads to the formation of the research questions. This is followed by a section on the research methods and methodologies employed, followed by the results and findings of the study. The next section discusses the deficiencies identified from the study before the article concludes.

### **Statement of the problem**

It is argued that the emergence of private higher education has come about due to African governments' inability to continue being the sole provider of higher education. Oghenekohwo and Abu (2011) argue that the seemingly negligence of the public sector to adequately fund higher education in most sub-Saharan African countries provided a justification for private initiatives in university education.

As a new phenomenon in Ghana, the private sector has been faced with challenges including admission malpractices, shortage of faculty members, inadequate physical facilities, financial constraints among others. In a World Bank/UNESCO (2000:27) report, the authors argue that "the expansion, in both public and private universities, has been unbridled, unplanned, and often 'chaotic', resulting in deterioration in average quality, continuing inter-regional, inter-country, and intra-country inequalities, and increased profit provision of higher education". Alongside the rapid growth of private universities in Ghana, however, came the concerns about the compromise of quality of private higher education. Little was known about this phenomenon which indicated a need to explore the dynamics of private higher education and its position in the human resource and research development in the country. In this view, this knowledge gap was identified which created the problem statement and consequently the purpose of the study was set.

A few studies have been carried out on quality assurance in both public and private higher education in Ghana. Mostly, the studies have focused on quality indicators, identifying the constraints and challenges and increased access made possible by private universities. The quality assurance framework developed from these studies has focused on matrix of indicators and key performance indicators (Alabi et al 2018, Utuka 2012, Baryeh 2006, Ntim 2014, Anane and Addaney 2016). However, no studies have been carried out to assess the internal quality assurance (IQA) implementation process in private universities with a view to developing a model for enhancing quality of higher education.

This study which involved eight selected private universities and two regulatory bodies sought to evaluate the internal quality assurance processes and how they are implemented at private universities. The aim of the study was to ascertain the effectiveness and develop a quality assurance model for the higher education sector.

### **QUALITY ASSURANCE – REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

One cannot discuss quality assurance without knowing what constitutes quality. While a large and growing body of literature has investigated the concept of quality, Galloway 1996 argues that there is still no universal definition of quality in the literature. However, there are some cohesions in the discussions among authors that quality is an elusive concept, ambiguous in nature, dynamic, contextual and multi-dimensional which makes it difficult to define (Green 1994, Harvey and Green 1993, Afshar 1990, Pounder 1999, Watty 2003, Schindler et al 2015). Similarly, in Ghana, the concept of quality continues to face definitional challenges (Ankomah

et al 2005, Baryeh 2009). This necessitated the need to formulate the first research question around the definition of quality to situate it in the context of Ghana.

To make a meaningful debate and find closure, Woo (2006) argues that the definition of quality must be unanimous on a global level, or at least, at the national level. Similarly, Cullen et al (2003) suggest that it is important that all stakeholders engage in a discourse that includes all the differing views and needs. This indicates that quality is a matter of agreement. In other words, certain parameters must be set to make an assessment or anything else, for that matter, to be meaningful. However, with no universal definition of quality, Sergers and Dochy (1996:115) argue that: *'it is not surprising that there is confusion about the terms used to describe the systematic procedures aimed at monitoring and enhancing quality'*.

### **Internal Quality Assurance Implementation**

Internal quality assurance (IQA) is one of the components of the broader quality assurance mechanism. Matei and Iwinska (2016) point out that IQA is a process which involves all activities (policies and procedures, systems and mechanisms) that evaluate and improve quality, and more so, are designed and carried out by the institutions themselves. Barnet (1992) adds a layer to the definition that it is the development of a culture by an institution to sensitise individuals about their input in improving quality. Other authors add that it is a continuous and cyclical system that is structured to maintain and improve quality (Vlasceanu *et al* (2004), AUN-QA 2010). Onocha (2002) makes a reference to industry by arguing that quality assurance could be compared with the production a good, which goes through a process from input, process stages to outcome at the end of the production cycle which is applicable to higher education. In simple terms, some authors (Materu 2007, Barnet 2003) are of the view that it is about a measure against a certain standard or doing something well.

To implement internal quality assurance, Matei & Iwinska (2016) argue that several models have been introduced in the higher education sector. Cheng and Cheung (1997) believe it is positive to have different models as they offer the sector varied possibilities in the quest to understand the quality in higher education. Vroeijsijin (1995) identifies a model of internal quality assurance, which assumes four basic elements that should be included in IQA system namely, institutional goals, monitoring instruments, evaluation instruments and improvement of quality. Chuan (Ed.) 2020 recommends a similar model which builds the entire IQA upon institution's vision and goal and includes monitoring instruments, evaluation instruments with some further activities as QA processes for specific activities and specific QA instruments. In a similar vein, Prisăcariu (2014) argues that the focus of the different models available include assessment of quality of results and quality of governance, which revolves around institutional goals. In addition to these instruments, Inglis (2005) introduces benchmarking as part of the internal quality assurance process. According to Inglis (2005:1), *'benchmarking is a term that is now widely used within the quality arena'*. Furthermore, Achim et al (2009) state that benchmarking creates an avenue for higher education institutions to share and emulate good practices. A study by Deming (1995) which the study adopted offers insight into the activities that go into the IQA process and the activities mentioned above are grouped into four major steps known as Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle (P-D-C-A), as shown below.

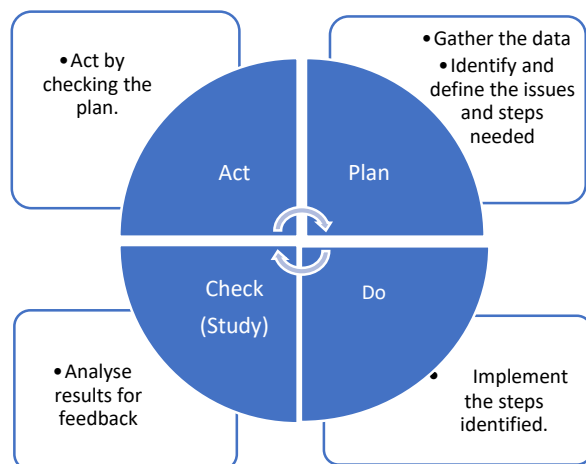


Fig. 2 Deming (1995)

The P-D-C-A cycle summarises the basic activities that keeps a process in motion and could be argued to be applicable to any system that requires to be monitored, evaluated and improved. In the view of Mishra (2006), this cycle of P-D-C-A depicts a fundamental cycle that should occur in all models of quality assurance, and surely applicable to higher education institutions. It is instructive to mention that this is not suggest all IQA systems follow the same procedure, as this is highly impossible due to the already mentioned elusive nature of quality. Following this discourse, the next research question was to find out about the current IQA processes at the participating universities. Dare (2005) adds another dimension to the argument that the processes that take place to measure educational quality are interrelated and therefore a defect in one process is likely to have quality implications in other processes. According to Dare (2005:17) argues that “*all the elements associated with educational quality are interrelated*’ which also indicates that “*a serious defect in one element is likely to have implications for quality in others.*” In the same vein, Owlia and Aspinwall (1997) cautions that the elements are variables and if one variable changes, it will inevitably lead to changes in the other variables which leads to the third research question which focuses on the effectiveness of the IQA processes at the participating universities.

Taken together, the literature suggests the IQA process which is cyclical and a continuous process consists of inter-related elements that must be carried out wholly if the process is going to be effective at the end. Following the above discourse, the study was guided by the above fundamental elements in the IQA process and their interactivity which will give an overall picture of quality of education provided by the private universities. The research questions identified from the literature are:

1. What is quality?
2. What are the current IQA processes at private universities?
3. How effective are the IQA processes?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The methodology selected for this study was Qualitative. Stern (1980) argues that qualitative methods are useful when one wants to explore into issues that little is known to help us acquire an understanding of the dynamics. The study therefore leans itself towards qualitative research as private higher education in Ghana is a new phenomenon and little is, therefore, known. As a study which sought to explore a new phenomenon, it was underpinned by the phenomenological and interpretivist constructivism research paradigms, utilising mixed research methods to collate data.

The study was conducted at eight private universities in Ghana offering degree programmes and two regulatory bodies, at the time of the study. Rubin and Rubin (2011) highlight that it is important for the researcher to interview people who have in depth knowledge and understanding of an issue to ensure the credibility of a study. In this regard, purposeful sampling was used to select the universities based on how long the university has been in existence; the existence of a quality assurance unit and for the questionnaires and interviews, the researcher requested for the quality assurance lead or manager. Given that the field work was carried out over a period, the first set of interviews and questionnaires sent out served as pilot and subsequent ones were refined to ensure reliability of tools used. For confidentiality reasons, the names of the universities and individuals who represented them were kept anonymous to protect their identities. The private universities were code-named as PU1, PU2 up to PU8. To answer the research, primary data was collected by using semi-structured and open-ended questionnaires and face-to-face interviews with the heads of quality assurance units at each university and the regulatory bodies. The researcher also reviewed existing literature on quality assurance, official documents provided by the interviewees and interrogated processes and practices; strategic plans, quality assurance guidelines and other information found on participants' websites. Finally, the data was analysed by categorizing, generating codes, searching, reviewing and defining themes (Braun and Clark 2013).

## **RESULT AND FINDINGS OF STUDY**

In the review of literature, it was argued that the IQA process, which is a continuous process begins with an institution recognizing or establishing its goals and mission. It consists of five basic elements namely Institutional goals, Monitoring Instruments, Evaluation, Benchmarking and Improving quality. It was also established that it was significant to define quality to make a meaningful debate and the interactivity of the elements to ensure the effectiveness of the IQA process was highlighted.

The first research question, therefore, required the participants to give their view on the definition of quality in higher education. The responses revealed that the universities had different views on what quality meant to them.

Table 1



PU1 - Education should be able to serve a certain purpose. Education is not for its own sake. It needs to be able to empower people to do certain things. If you are able to do that and do that very well, then we can say the quality is good. We are looking at certain outcomes and if at the end of the day, we are able to achieve those things, then the quality is good. Now wherever you go globally, people are questioning the quality of education. It's not only in Ghana. We are talking about numeracy skills, communication skills, critical thinking, etc. If education is able to achieve these things, then the quality is good. And for us, as a parochial institution, we add another dimension, and the dimension is that we also prepare you for eternity. So sometimes we question ourselves if we are fulfilling that role.

PU8 - Quality or quality assurance is an ongoing cyclical improvement. You do not just get there and stop. It's a continuous process.

NCTE - Quality in higher education encompasses all the activities of tertiary education institutions such as teaching, academic programmes, research, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, academic environment, service to the community etc. with the view of enhancing efficiency, effectiveness, higher standards, excellence, value for money and fitness of purpose to meet the national development needs of the country.

PU4 - Process of ensuring standards are sustained and improved in the higher education system to bring forth well trained graduates and strong research output.

PU5 - Quality is when our graduates are selected appropriately and undergo all the laid down systems and structures in place for the 'production' of graduates. It includes learning the right courses, being taught by qualified lecturers, being given all the necessary support and pastoral care to enhance student experience.

Compared the responses in table 1 to the argument in the literature review, there was no consensus in their responses which goes to confirm the literature review that quality is of a slippery nature and difficult to define. As shown above, some of the participants were of the view that quality was determined by the quality of outcomes and facilities. Next, the participants were required to describe their IQA process to identify the basic elements in the universities' IQA process. Further questions were asked about how their IQA unit functioned. Below are some of their responses.

### **Planning – Setting Institutional Goal**

The study established that each of the eight universities had an institutional goal. As argued in the literature, setting an institutional goal which begins the planning stage is the first step in the IQA process. In addition, given the difficulties in defining quality which impacts on what to include in quality assurance, setting an institutional goal gives the university a working framework as it guides the university on what is there to monitor, evaluate and improve.

Table 2

University	Institutional Goal/Objective
PU1	To pursue academic, vocational, technological, and spiritual excellence to prepare students for service to God and humanity.
PU2	To produce a new generation of graduates who are endowed with ethical and entrepreneurial skills; to instill in students the ability to think critically; have concern for others and have the courage to make an impact in the world.
PU3	To nurture a vibrant academic community through the creation and dissemination of knowledge through research.
PU4	To become a centre of excellence in the core areas of a university which are teaching, learning and research.
PU5	Provide an enabling environment for quality teaching and learning, research, intellectual creativity, innovation and service to community.
PU6	To embolden students to serve humanity and posterity; and instil in them values like integrity and the fear of God.
PU7	To develop a human resource which is of world-class standard and equip them with appropriate skills sets and attitude to meet the country's human resource needs.
PU8	To raise highly skilful, visionary, ethical, and God-fearing leaders to function as change agents.

Stating the institutional goal is the strategy that determines the direction of the IQA system. However, it is instructive to state that having an institutional goal doesn't automatically ensure an effective QA process.

### **Check and Study (Monitoring and Evaluation)**

All the eight universities had a QA unit with a Lead Officer responsible for internal quality assurance. However, the study revealed that monitoring and evaluation were not thoroughly carried out by the universities. To facilitate monitoring and evaluation, the literature highlighted the importance of data collection and integrity. All the universities indicated in their responses that they collect data on on physical and human resources, teaching and learning, monitoring and evaluation, governance and curriculum. Below are some of the responses when the participants were asked to give information on their QA Unit and describe how it functioned in ensuring that their inputs and processes were monitored and evaluated.

Table 3



PU1 - We have an officer, directorate of quality assurance. When it comes to students learning, there are questionnaires that we are supposed to respond to. Students also evaluate teaching and learning; they evaluate faculty so that's also in place. The various levels, right down from the Dean to the heads of departments are supposed to oversee what's done to ensure teaching and learning are being done effectively. Heads of department, for instance are supposed to check course outlines, questions have to be sent outside for moderation but sometimes moderation of questions are done internally. All these are in place. And then periodically, we are supposed to queries from the Pro-Vice Chancellors office. These checks are done at least once every term but there are certain things that the departments are supposed to do. For instance, in order to make sure the departments are doing what they are supposed to do, the departments are supposed to meet at twice a semester, they are supposed to have their minutes deposited at the Pro-Vie Chancellor's Office, so he knows exactly what's going on at the departments. These are the specific schedules in place but if for some reason, the Pro Vice chancellor feels that some information needs to be provided or the Dean feels that certain information needs to be provided based on something that is going on, then he can instruct heads of department to provide the information.

PU2 - The Quality Assurance Committee has the responsibility of ensuring that the university maintains acceptable teaching and learning processes. The Quality Assurance Committee appraises curriculum reviews, pre- and post-moderation reports, NAB accreditation reviews, performance reviews, examination and final grade distributions, and/or any other issues pertaining to quality that Academic Council or members of the Quality Assurance Committee choose to bring forward. It has advisory responsibility for maintaining facilities on campus in terms of growth, IT and academic spaces which includes classrooms, faculty and staff offices.

The Quality Assurance Committee is a committee of the Academic Council. It is chaired by the Quality Assurance Officer of the University.

PU8 - The university views QA as an ongoing cyclical process which require continuous improvement. There is an overall body for QA, and then there are is a QA lead at the faculty, department and unit levels. Broad targets are set which trickles down to each level with quarterly meetings held with the various departmental and unit heads, who give a report on targets that were or were not achieved. For instance, lecturers make known their targets for the academic year and so at the end of the year, lecturers will have to report if they achieved their target or not. Where targets are not achieved, lecturers are required to explain why and state what preventative measures would be taken so it does not reoccur. For non-teaching departments like Alumini, targets like how many students go into internship and outcomes are monitored.

The universities indicated that they carried out periodic or quarterly checks on these processes by giving students the opportunities to evaluate their experiences; and faculty members also carry out peer reviews to identify strengths and weaknesses. One participant added that because they are a faith university, the church also carries out its own periodic evaluation of the university and make recommendations. The situation, however, was not the same with data on their outputs and outcomes (the long-term effect of higher education). It became apparent that there was insufficient data on output and outcome, with three of the participants admitting that

they would begin to monitor their output and outcomes, going forward. Hence, the universities could not provide enough and meaningful information about the destinations of their graduates, what impact or changes their education has had on them and their values and behaviours at their various destinations. With insufficient data on output and outcomes, it raises the question of whether indicators like employment and destination of students, changes in attitudes, values and behavior are being monitored to make the quality process complete. This revelation does not support the arguments in the literature review and contradicts the information we know in the literature. The argument in the literature was that each stage of the IQA process is equally important and are connected to each other. A default in one has the potential to render the entire process ineffective. Potentially, the lack of a thorough monitoring and evaluation system that captures all the quality indicators would have a negative impact on the IQA implementation process as it raises the question of whether quality assurance is effective. There are further implications at the strategic level as Thune (1998) argues that this is an institutional check that informs the university as to whether it is meeting its strategic mission and goals and allows for action to be taken if necessary. Another implication is the effectiveness of the entire IQA process as when one stage is not effective, it is likely to affect the other stages. Against the background that components of quality must work together to measure quality, it could be argued that quality is not assessed thoroughly and therefore quality assurance is not effective. In addition, it was also apparent from the study that the universities had adopted different IQA approaches. The different approaches may indicate that one university could have more robust systems than others or sharing of information and learning can take place, hence the need for the universities to benchmark. However, the responses did not indicate there was a practice of benchmarking in any of the universities.

### **Acting (Improvements)**

As was mentioned earlier, making improvements or acting on feedback is an important stage of the IQA process. The IQA process is meaningless if no improvements are made from feedback from the evaluation stage. For this reason, it is logical to argue that improving quality which completes the IQA process also makes the whole process and in particular the evaluation, an effective one. In consequence, the study paid attention to whether the universities had this stage in their IQA process. The participating universities were asked to describe what happened after monitoring and evaluation. Apart from PU1, PU7 and PU8 which stated, categorically, that they made improvements, or they put in preventative measures when targets or objectives or processes did not achieve the desired goal, the rest of the universities did not indicate so. The emerging theme in the responses was that there was a plan in place, and it is implemented, however, the plan does not indicate that it was part of IQA process to make improvements. As mentioned in the literature review, an internal QA process, fundamentally follows four major steps as explained by Denning's (1999) to consist of Plan, Do, Check and Act (P-D-C-A). The responses were, therefore, not consistent with the literature review. Here, again, the result raises questions on the effectiveness of the IQA process at the participating universities.

## **DISCUSSION - DEFICIENCIES IN IQA PROCESS**

The study established that the IQA process at the selected universities was not entirely consistent with the literature review. First, the culture of data collection was not inherent amongst the universities. Data collection has been set aside as a level or stage in the IQA process as the outcome of the study established the lack of data collection in the participating universities. It is important for the private universities to recognise the significance of data collection in the IQA process. As discussed in the literature review, a key aspect of monitoring is data collection. The literature review established that there was a relationship between data collection and monitoring. Vroeijenstijn (1995), argues that a good monitoring system is a necessity to facilitate the collection of data about the activities of the university. To ensure that there is data collection and integrity, which subsequently allows for monitoring, data collection must be seen to be a part or a unit in the IQA process.

Furthermore, it was apparent in the responses received that benchmarking was not a part of the internal quality processes at the universities. The responses received indicated that the universities did well in planning, implement, monitor and evaluate even though they did not monitor and evaluate all the quality indicators. However, none of the participants made mention of benchmarking to see what other universities were doing. Benchmarking as described in the literature review by Achim et al (1999) allows the university to learn from each other and share good practice. Importantly, they could benefit from comparing the performances of their competitors or similar institutions, referred to as competitive or collaborative benchmarking, respectively. Kagonda and Marwa (2017) in their study of quality assurance practices in Kenya, higher education institutions can benefit from benchmarking with their peers who are ahead of them on specific parameters of quality.

In addition, it was evident in the responses received for the study that the improvements stage of the IQA process was not carried out by the six of the universities. The significance of improving quality was highlighted in the literature review. It was argued that it was the stage of the IQA process that made the entire IQA process effective. The outcome of the study confirms the argument made by Soundararajan et al (2018) that much attention was given to all the other elements of the IQA process with a relatively less attention given to making improvement. It was argued in the literature review that without this stage of improving quality, the purpose of the IQA process was bound to be defeated. The purpose of the IQA process is to improve quality. Hence, if the evaluation feedback is not acted upon, the purpose will not be achieved. This makes the improving quality stage a critical stage, but it's the early stages that give the data needed at the final stage. It was further established in the literature review that for the final stage to be effective, the institution must have the human resource capacity to effect the changes required to improve quality.

Another significant revelation was the absence of universal definition of quality in the higher education sector of Ghana which confirms the literature. This was evidenced in the responses received from participants when they were asked to define quality. As shown in the previous section, the responses revealed three themes which indicated a divide in the viewpoints of the

participants – a situation which reflects the literature review and could potentially impinge on the effectiveness in the quality assurance mechanisms at the participating universities. The study addressed this need by arguing that to make the discussion on quality meaningful, there must be a debate amongst stakeholders on what constitute quality in the Ghanaian context and parameters agreed at the national level.

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a paucity of research on evaluating how quality is assured and implementation challenges in the private higher education sector in Ghana. The findings of this study, therefore, provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding and knowledge of the effectiveness and robustness of quality assurance at the private universities. In addition, the study adds to the growing body of literature on higher education and goes further to address the gaps that were identified in the IQA process as demonstrated in the next section. At both the international and national level, the study provides additional evidence in relation to the definition of quality.

Considering the above, the study has sought to address the deficiencies identified in the IQA process and filled the gaps as demonstrated in the section below.

### Internal Quality Assurance Model

To enable the universities to improve on all the areas of IQA process, it is important that they have an effective data collection system that captures their activities and subsequently support monitoring and evaluation, benchmarking and quality improvement. In this regard, the QA model as depicted below was developed with considerations given to the existing deficiencies and interventions needed to ensure that quality assurance is effective and thorough. The figure below depicts the fundamental elements of the Plan-Do-Check-Act (P-D-C-A) cycle adopted for the study; and the stages in the IQA process as reviewed in the literature. It also depicts the current practices, and it is contextual to the private higher education sector in Ghana, as it considers the deficiencies that emanated from the study.

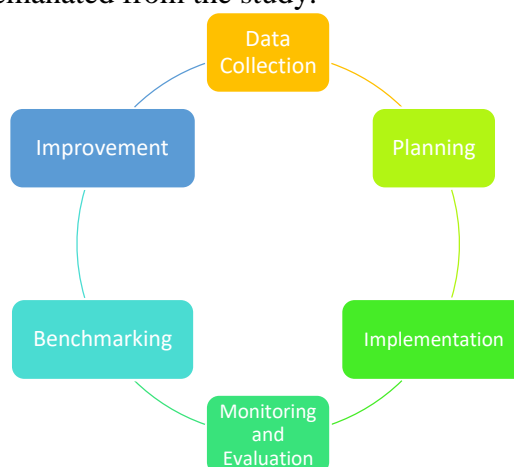


Fig. 3 Internal Quality Assurance Model

The three practices that appeared to be weak or non-existent in the existing practices at the participating universities were identified as data collection, benchmarking and improving

quality. As discussed in the literature review, a key aspect of monitoring and evaluation is data collection. The literature review established that there was a relationship between data collection and effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation. A reference was made to Vroeijerstijn (1995), who argues that a good monitoring system is a necessity to facilitate the collection of data about the activities of the university.

The model above depicts the importance for universities to consider data collection as the first stage of their IQA process. This will ensure that the process is not impacted by the lack of data collection when it gets to the monitoring and evaluation stage. In other words, data collection must be an ongoing daily activity before the planning stage which subsequently allows for monitoring and evaluation to be effective. Data collection must be an inherent culture and universities must invest in systems that allow an automatic and easy collation of data or the universities must set aside time in their IQA process for data collection. Currently, with no effective data collection, it raises questions on the effectiveness of the IQA systems at the private universities. It also raises questions on how the universities can determine whether they are fulfilling their institutional goals. The figure also highlights the argument in the literature review that IQA is cyclical, and the stages are interconnected and each stage feed into the next. Therefore, a deficiency in one stage is likely to render the next stage ineffective and consequently render the entire process ineffective. The figure depicts the interconnectivity between the stages, and it is important that private universities recognise the interconnected stages of the IQA process.

In addition to the above, the study established that there was no universal definition of quality in the higher education sector of Ghana and that impacts on what constitutes quality assurance. The literature review highlighted that one of the ways to deal with the slippery and elusive nature of quality which has made it difficult for society to find a definition was to agree to set parameters. To this end, there must be a debate amongst stakeholders on what constitute quality in the Ghanaian context. It is important that the regulators initiate a national debate that answers questions like 'What is quality in the Ghanaian context? What outcome would we like higher education to achieve? A discussion around these questions will be the beginning of a meaningful direction to defining quality in Ghana.

## **CONCLUSION**

Higher education, as described by Sanyal and Martin (1998) is an impetus for knowledge creation and socio-economic development. It is universally recognised as a key contributor to the long-term socio-economic development of a country. It is against this background that the emergence of private higher education in Ghana was welcomed at a time when the state universities could no longer cope with the demand for higher education. In a statistical report, Tertiary Education Statistics (2016) it was revealed that enrolment of students in the private universities increased consistently between 2011 and 2016 academic years. While the emergence increased access to higher education and was welcome by Ghanaians, naturally, there was a concern of the compromise of quality standards. This study was therefore designed to investigate the quality assurance mechanisms existing at some of the private universities



with a view to produce a model that will strengthen the current systems existing at the universities.

While the emergence of private universities has increased access to higher education over the years, the results of the study indicate that IQA processes at the participating universities are ineffective due to their inability to carry out the process wholly. There were three important stages that needed to be embedded in their current IQA systems – data collection, benchmarking and improving quality. It was also highlighted in the literature review that to effectively monitor and evaluate the IQA process, it required data collection and making improvements from evaluation, therefore the lack of data collection as evidenced in the study raises questions about the effectiveness of IQA at the private universities.

Furthermore, the higher education sector is a diverse one with both state and private universities. This is a demography that has a rich knowledge resource, and the universities can share best practices among themselves if they embed benchmarking in their IQA systems. As argued in the literature review, benchmarking creates an avenue for higher education institutions to share and emulate good practices (Achim et al (2009). The higher education sector will benefit from a higher education quality network of all universities where there is a balance scoreboard that collects data on key performance indicators and sharing of best practices. The benefit of this platform is that it will facilitate benchmarking in IQA processes amongst the universities which will improve quality standards. Kagondou and Marwa (2017) argue that benchmarking will leverage the universities' standing on the quality spectrum which is an essential part of quality management.

Moreover, it is important for the regulator to initiate a national debate to establish the definition of quality in the Ghanaian context. The debate will help establish what the stakeholders would like to use as quality indicators for the universities. This process will ensure the universities work towards an agreed expectation and it will also reduce inconsistencies in the sector. As mentioned, Woo (2006) argues that the definition of quality must be unanimous on a global level, or at least, at the national level. The sector will benefit from more clear-cut directions on what constitutes quality. This direction will guide the private universities in developing IQA systems which incorporates all the fundamentals of assuring quality.

In conclusion, the findings of the study add to the growing body of literature on how IQA is implemented at the private universities and provides further evidence to the literature to highlight the absence of a universal definition of quality in both the international higher education space and that of Ghana. The study has demonstrated that the private universities need to improve their data collection activity, make the conscious effort to implement quality improvement from feedback and form the habit of benchmarking to aid in their quality improvement actions. Private universities are playing a part in building the country's human resource capacity and although developments in relation to access is encouraging, this must not be achieved at the expense of quality.



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