Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Accreditation, said to have originated from the United States of America (USA), has been in practice for over a century (Ludes III, 2003). The concept was introduced mainly as a voluntary effort by colleges and universities to stem the tide of inadequate admission requirements and the lowering of academic standards, which seemed to be developing at the end of the 19th century. The US accreditation system has been credited with contributing two major elements to the quality assurance processes adopted in many other countries (Westerheijden et al., 1994). The best known is the use of self-studies in which data are gathered, analysed and interpreted by the operators of a programme or by the institution itself. The other is the use of peer review panels in which experts from outside of the academic department or institution visit to conduct an evaluation of the programme and prepare a confidential report including suggestions for improvement.

The historical development of quality assurance, in general, and accreditation, in particular, in Europe has travelled through a rather chequered path. In Europe, just as in many other jurisdictions, quality in the sense of achieving academic excellence has always been a central value in higher education (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Until the 1970s, however, quality in higher education was controlled through bureaucratic means such as legal conditions for the establishment of institutions and state-provided means to fulfil those conditions. Other measures included centralized and formalized rules for the appointment of academic staff and the acceptance of students. Until new developments affecting the higher education sector emerged in the 1970s and the 1980s, these measures of ensuring quality seemed to be working successfully (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Quality assurance became a separate instrument in university management and in government policy because of the desire of the public sector to adopt successful business practices in their own operations. The Japanese fame for economic prominence, through quality control and quality
assurance, gained popular influence in higher education management in this regard (Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens, 2006). Higher education institutions were thus given more autonomy to be more efficient in the use of resources while placing the concept of ‘value for money’ high on the agenda (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). The consequent demand for external quality assurance led to the integration of evaluation into new schemes serving multiple and other goals than the improvement of individual courses. Evaluation before this era had been at the level of voluntary improvement of teaching methods by individual lecturers (Westerheijden et al, 2006).

In Africa, the establishment of formal national quality assurance agencies and processes began with the creation in 1968 of the 16-member Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l’Enseignement Superieur (CAMES) by Francophone African states. The main function of the organization then was the harmonization of the recognition and equivalence of awards among member states. This responsibility has since been increased to include the accreditation of private universities and a select number of professional programmes (Materu, 2007; p. 18). In 1981, Nigeria became the first Anglophone African state to enter the field of quality assurance with the creation of the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE). South Africa followed in 1986, with the setting up of the Committee of Technikon Principals. Both organizations took charge of quality assurance in technical education in their respective countries.

Kenya’s Commission for Higher Education (CHE) is the first national accreditation agency set up in Africa to oversee university-level education, in that country by legislation, in 1985. The performance of the agency’s functions commenced in 1989 and this included accreditation and inspection of institutions of higher education, after the establishment of standards for accreditation in the same year. Although the Kenyan agency began operations with the accreditation of private universities only, its mandate has now been broadened to include new public universities, foreign universities and/or other agencies operating on their behalf (CHE, 2006).

The second African country to commence university-level accreditation was Nigeria whose National Universities Commission (NUC) – a body originally established in 1962 to have oversight responsibility for the country’s higher education system – conducted
the first programme accreditations in 1990-91. After conducting a second round of programme accreditation exercises in 1999-2000, the NUC, notably, included the ranking of universities using twelve performance indicators in the third round of accreditation exercises which commenced in 2005 (Jibril, 2006). Worthy of note is the fact that the Nigerian accreditation exercises involved only programmes and not institutions.

Other African countries such as Cameroon, Ghana, Tanzania and Mauritius established their quality assurance agencies between 1991 and 1997 (Materu, 2007). Most of these countries began operations with the accreditation of new private institutions before venturing to public institutions due to either limited resources, limited legal mandate or both. South Africa, which has had a longer tradition of well-established university education system than many African countries, established the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council for Higher Education (CHE) in 2001.

In Ghana, the law establishing the National Accreditation Board (NAB) was passed in 1993 after the then government had decided to liberalize provision of tertiary education to bring in private providers. For practical purposes – acquiring and furnishing office space, hiring staff for the secretariat and more importantly, putting the regulatory procedures in place – the board became operational in 1995 with the evaluation and accreditation of the first few private university colleges. It was however, not until the year 2005 that the board began evaluating and accrediting public universities and their programmes.

The concept and practice of accreditation was introduced in Ghana against the backdrop of an increased crave for tertiary, especially university, education and political activity (please refer to Chapter 2 - Environmental Scan of Ghana). As pertained in many African countries, (already alluded to by Materu, 2007), the quality of provision in existing state universities was perceived to be declining mainly due to their inability to resist the pressure to increase enrolments when there had not been corresponding expansion of infrastructure and human resources to accommodate such increases. Although private provision had been meant to help address the issue of increased enrolments, there was the perception that private providers were more interested in recouping their investments in the shortest possible time and make
profits for themselves even if at the expense of quality provision (Materu & Righetti, 2010).

The accrediting agency – National Accreditation Board – was therefore established as a regulatory and external quality assurance body to keep the public tertiary education institutions focused on training quality graduates for national development and prevent rogue providers from the private sector from entering the field. The agency was also to ensure that the training and the resultant academic and professional certificates awarded were comparable to those awarded anywhere in the world (University Rationalisation Committee Report, 1988; National Accreditation Board Act, 2007; Materu, 2007).

1.2 Objectives of study

Having instituted and operated the system of accreditation against the recounted background for a little over two decades, this study aims at assessing the impact, however limited, the system has made on the quality of university education in Ghana, using specified factors as indicators. Thus, the study assesses the influence accreditation has had in selected Ghanaian public and private universities, exploring from evaluation reports of at least two cycles of assessments, whether there had been improvements in the academic programmes, and facilities for teaching and learning, in those institutions. In the same vein, the study attempts to determine, from the perspectives of key stakeholders – evaluators, academics teaching on the assessed programmes and students - whether improvements, if any, had been mainly instigated, directly or indirectly by the accreditation procedure’s assessments and quality measures.

For purposes of this study, impact is defined as changes effected in any aspect of an institution’s programme and facilities in conformity with the accreditation procedure’s established norms and, or as a result of suggestions for improvement by its appointed evaluators, during accreditation exercises.

The study will finally compare the responses from the various stakeholders and institutional categories and attempt an explanation of those responses in the perspectives of the reviewed theoretical notions. The study’s main question is: Has accreditation made an impact on quality assurance in Ghanaian universities?
This main question is narrowed down to research sub-questions to address specific aspects of the study. The first sub-question is: **Has accreditation influenced the quality of specified indicators in Ghanaian universities after two or more cycles of assessments?**

The Ghanaian accreditation agency appointed evaluators to assess specified indicators in the country’s universities to determine whether they met known minimum standards before the agency granted them accreditation. Thus, the study examined the evaluators’ reports on these indicators from one cycle of assessment to a succeeding one to determine the level of changes that had occurred in them. The results were assessed quantitatively to find out whether the changes were for better or worse and, if for better, whether those changes were mainly attributable to the implementation of suggestions for improvement made by the evaluators.

The second sub-question is: **Were there differential impacts of accreditation measures on the public and private universities in Ghana, between two evaluations in the period 2006-2014 and what might have accounted for any such differences?**

With this question, the study sought to determine, from the reports by the evaluators the differential improvements or deterioration in the specified indicators between the two assessment cycles, and between the public and private universities. Additionally, the opinions of academics teaching on the programmes, from which the assessed indicators were selected, were sought to determine whether there had been improvements or deterioration in those specified indicators. Their opinions were also compared between the respective institution categories.

To complete the cycle of opinions from all the major stakeholders with respect to quality improvement in university education, the study elicited students’ views through a third research sub-question. Thus, **Do students’ perspectives confirm or deny the existence of policies/measures in line with accreditation requirements, in their universities and do their responses have any association with the type of university – public or private – attended?**

1.3 **Theoretical Notions**

In the absence of any direct applicable theory in the field of accreditation, two theories – Neo Institutional theory and Resource
Dependency theory – are borrowed from the broader social sciences to explain the underlying circumstances that compel higher education institutions to seek accreditation. In this chapter, the study explores the link between accreditation and quality assurance in the selected institutions. More importantly, efforts are made to utilise the cited theories to explain the development. The theories also assist in providing the reasons for the differential accreditation impacts on quality, if any, on the public, as compared to the private universities in Ghana.

A discussion of DiMaggio & Powell’s (1991) postulation on how organizations strive to maintain a fit between their operations and their environments to achieve legitimation, among others, and how this could be extended to the operations of higher education institutions is discussed. It should be noted that achieving and maintaining legitimacy require the continual acquisition of resources by organizations mainly form their environments. In the particular case of higher education institutions, the legitimacy attained will, all things being equal, enhance their competitiveness in acquiring resources such as research grants and students to maintain their survival. It is against this backdrop that the Resource Dependency Theory is discussed to link the institutions’ quest for legitimacy (accreditation) to the acquisition of resources to maintain their legitimacy.

Underlying the adopted theoretical notions is the practical doctrine of New Managerialism, which demands the opening up of higher education institutions, like all organizations, for monitoring and evaluation as well as the assessment and reassessment of their activities – which informs accreditation exercises. The doctrine has been classified as ‘new’ because it deploys managerialist principles in public sector and other non-governmental organizations (Lynch, Grummell & Devine, 2012; McCrea, 2014). Reforms in higher education institutions arising out of the application of the concept were to make the institutions more competitive, entrepreneurial or market-oriented (Clark, 1998).

1.4 Focus of Study

The study focuses on an analysis of the improvement or deterioration of input factors that contributed to the quality of teaching and learning in Ghanaian universities. Admittedly, this constitutes a limitation.
because there are obviously other factors – process and outcomes – that also contribute to quality assurance in the universities. At the time of the study, however, the systems in place in Ghana had not developed effective mechanisms to assess the process/outcomes factors although some work was going on by the accreditation agency to address this shortcoming eventually.

The study also analyses data gathered from active stakeholders in the university system – evaluators, academics teaching on the assessed programmes and students studying on the assessed programmes. Student responses to questionnaires were, however, to assess the impact of quality measures, albeit indirectly, put in place by the accreditation procedure and provide verification as to whether the requirements of the accrediting body were in place in their respective institutions. This was because apart from the occasional interviewing of students for their opinions by visitation teams from the accreditation agency, there was no systematised student participation in the accreditation process in Ghana as at the time of the study.

Programme and facility evaluators were expected to do independent assessments based on their knowledge and professional competence. In the case of the other respondent stakeholders – academics and students – their views were expected to be based on their teaching and learning experiences.

What this study attempts to do is to make a useful beginning in adding to the body of knowledge on the accreditation processes and the contribution they make to the quality development of universities in emerging countries.

1.5 Study’s Methodological Bases

The expanse of the theories and scope of the subject matter for the study necessitates the adoption of both quantitative and qualitative approaches for data collection and analysis. This follows from a distinct tradition in the literature on social science research methods that advocate the use of multiple methods. This research strategy has been variously described as multi-trait, convergent-, multi-methodology, convergent validation or, triangulation (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Webb et al., 1966; Jick, 1979; Baskerville, Stage & DeGross, 2000). These various notions share the conception that qualitative and quantitative
methods may be viewed as complementary rather than rival (Jick, 1979).

1.6 Structure of dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation is structured into eight chapters as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a general overview of developments in tertiary/higher education and an environmental scan of the West African country of Ghana, where the study was conducted.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the concept of accreditation as it relates to quality and quality assurance in higher education institutions.

Chapter 4 discusses the theoretical perspectives adopted from the social sciences to explain aspects of the study’s findings.

Chapter 5 provides and explains the general methodology utilised for the study.

Chapter 6 examines the impact accreditation has had on the improvement of operational inputs (indicators) after two cycles of assessments in some Ghanaian universities. The chapter addresses the first sub research questions.

Chapter 7 presents the findings and conclusions on the differential impacts the accreditation processes have had on the Ghanaian public and private universities in terms of quality development. This published article addresses the second sub research question.

Chapter 8 This penultimate chapter presents students’ views on the compliance of accreditation measures, especially those relating to their learning experiences in their respective universities.

Chapter 9 concludes the dissertation with a summary of findings and conclusions of the study.