Chapter 2
Overview of developments in tertiary education and an environmental scan of Ghana

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will briefly recount developments in higher education, especially in Europe, in the 1980s and 1990s, and draw up parallels on how these developments reflected on the African continent. I will do an environmental scan of Ghana, where this study took place, and narrate developments in its immediate past history that affected tertiary education in the country. The chapter will conclude with a provision of the circumstances that culminated in the establishment of the National Accreditation Board, as Ghana’s tertiary education regulatory body.

2.2 Developments in higher education – 1980s to 1990s

The period from late 1960s through to the 1990s witnessed large enrolments, usually referred to as ‘massification’ of higher education in most European countries in particular and the developed world in general. The World Bank Report (2002) quoted tertiary student enrolment figures in the OECD region as rising from about 25 per cent in 1980 to slightly less than 50 per cent in 1995. Particular examples from Great Britain and the Netherlands indicated growth in student enrolments into higher education from 19 per cent to 50 per cent and from 29 per cent to 49 per cent, in the respective countries, for students of age group 18-22 in the period between 1985 and 1995. Some of the factors accounting for this development included the rise in welfare, consequence of growing wealth and growth in the ranks of middle class families (Kogan & Hanney, 2000).

The resultant expansion in higher education institutions and the consequent increased budgetary provision for that sector by governments, therefore, resulted in the latter’s wish to exercise more oversight responsibility, either directly or indirectly, in ensuring the effective and efficient use of funds (Scott, 1995). The institution of
quality control measures – either in the form of accreditation or quality audits, partially resulted from the sequence of events recounted above.

2.2.1 The African Scene

The global trend of increased higher education enrolments was also reflected on the African continent. Figures cited by Materu (2007) indicate that between 1985 and 2002, the number of tertiary education students increased by 3.6 times – from 800,000 to 3 million – an annual average of about 15 per cent. More recent figures indicate that universities in many African countries are still experiencing a surge in their enrolments. For instance, figures cited by the African-American Institute (2015) show that between the years 2000 and 2010, higher education enrolments more than doubled, increasing from 2.3 million to 5.2 million. Perhaps, even more prominently than in the West, public investment did not keep up with this pace thus forcing governments, especially under donor agency inspiration, to liberalize provision to include private providers. From the year 2000 to 2007, about a third of the roughly 300 universities that operated in Sub-Saharan Africa were privately funded (Materu, 2007). This significantly reduced, but did not eliminate, the pressure of social demand for higher education. Quite a number of otherwise qualified students remained outside the higher education system due to lack of space for them in the already overcrowded public higher education institutions. Many of such students were also unable to pay the high fees demanded by private providers. Meanwhile, the rapid growth in student enrolments, in most cases, did not take into account the existing capacity of facilities, human resources and budgetary provision in the public higher education institutions. This, no doubt, created problems with regard to quality provision, during the 1980s and 1990s, in the continent’s higher education. Ghana, for instance, witnessed a 400 per cent growth rate in higher education enrolment from the 1991/92 figure of 11,857 to 63,576 in 2003/2004 (World Bank Report, 2007). In Nigeria the number of universities grew from six in 1970 to 240 in 2006 with an enrolment of over 1.5 million (Okebukola, 2006). The quality of teaching and learning suffered profoundly in both countries consequently, necessitating concerns and complaints from stakeholders including parents and employers.
Private provision of higher education in Africa, mainly sponsored by faith-based organizations and private businesspersons, is a relatively recent development. There is a perception that the profit motive of these providers makes them relax on the rigours of quality demanded of higher education institutions (Materu, 2007). Fuelling this perception perhaps, is the fact that most of the private university students are recruited from the ‘left-overs’ of the public universities (mainly after the public universities’ admission processes had ended). This, however, remains only a perception as a scientific study to confirm or deny it is yet to be conducted.

The need for increased access has not only led to the liberalization of higher education provision to include private providers but also the setting up of regulatory bodies to establish and enforce minimum standards in the institutions. It has also led to a combination of cost sharing between government and students as well as the introduction of pure fee-paying courses to those who can afford. The consequent demand for more transparency and accountability in the use of resources places an added responsibility on the regulatory bodies to monitor and enforce value for money and quality measures in the higher education institutions they regulate. Thus, the regulatory body’s role is to ensure that students are not being short-changed and, like their European counterparts, assure resource providers that their contributions are utilised effectively and efficiently for the intended purpose (Materu & Righetti, 2010).

In sum, the establishment of quality assurance agencies in many countries in Africa is to address issues and problems related to:

- Increased demand for higher education and rising private provision – public higher education institutions are to stick to their core mandate of producing highly trained personnel while preventing private providers from letting their profit motive cloud the quest for quality training.

- Rapid growth in enrolment without matching budgetary provision – agencies are to ensure that this does not constitute a pretext by higher education institutions to fall below established minimum standards.

- Demands for increased transparency and accountability – regulatory agencies are to ensure that resources provided by
stakeholders (governments, parents, etc.) are used effectively and efficiently for their intended purpose to achieve value for money.

- Need for reforms to address new challenges – higher education institutions are to reorganize (e.g. use new technologies) to expand access without compromising on quality and re-focus their training and research activities to priority areas to speed up socio-economic development of their societies.

- Ensure harmonization with global trends in order to ensure comparability, and therefore, continued recognition of qualifications and awards worldwide.

2.2.2 Historical Development of Higher Education in Ghana

After a series of studies and reports, the then colonial power, Britain, established the University College of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) by an ordinance dated 11 August 1948. The purpose of the college was to provide and promote university education, learning and research’ (University of Ghana’s 50th Anniversary Brochure, 1998: p.5). This was done alongside the establishment of another university college in Ibadan, Nigeria to cater for the needs of the inhabitants of that (British) colonial territory. The colonial government then established an inter-university council officially to advise her on higher education in the British colonies but, presumably as a quality assurance measure, to approve all academic appointments in the established university colleges (Agbodeka, 1998). Another measure that was put in place to ensure that the new university colleges, in Accra and in Ibadan conformed to standards, albeit those of the University of London, was what became known as the ‘scheme of special relationship’ (Agbodeka, 1998, p.7). Under this scheme, the new university colleges taught programmes of the University of London, which in some cases had been modified to suit local conditions. The University of London conducted examinations for students of the university colleges and awarded their degrees and diplomas to successful candidates. Thus, the University College of the Gold Coast could be described as an affiliate institution of the University of London.

The Gold Coast became the new sovereign state of Ghana upon gaining independence from the United Kingdom on 6th March 1957. An
International Commission on Higher Education, was established by the post-colonial government in 1960 to, among others, advise on the direction tertiary education was to go under the new dispensation. An Act of Parliament created the University of Ghana from the University College of the Gold Coast in 1961, based on the recommendation of the international commission.

2.2.2.1 Post-Colonial Policy on Education

The post-colonial government began an aggressive policy of increasing literacy rates of Ghanaians at all levels of education to enable them take over the civil and public services. The mostly British expatriate staff had hitherto, exclusively occupied the management ranks of these services and it was the desire of the new government to reverse this trend to give true meaning to independence. Additionally, the post-colonial government’s major objective was to produce a well-educated workforce capable of propelling Ghana into a middle income country as early as possible (Akyeampong, 2010). Thus basic and secondary schools were not only provided throughout the country but were also made free (and compulsory at the basic level). Students in the secondary schools paid token fees for boarding and lodging while those who proceeded to the universities enjoyed a completely fee-free education.

The government also utilized the recommendations of the international commission to establish additional universities in Ghana’s second city, Kumasi, and in the coastal town of Cape Coast to increase access to university education and to ensure a rapid socio-economic development of the new nation-state. The government’s education policies enabled it to achieve its set objective of ‘Africanizing’ the top echelons of the public services (including those of the police and military services) in stark contrast to what obtained in many other African countries. The policy of expanding facilities, especially of tertiary education and making it free and accessible to all qualified candidates, however, came to an abrupt end with the overthrow of the immediate post-colonial government by the military and the police in a coup d’État in 1966.
The period after the first coup d’état to the restoration of a stable democratic government in Ghana (February 1966 – January 1993) could be regarded as very tumultuous with severe adverse consequences for the development of tertiary education in the country. The military continued to dominate the political scene in Ghana after overthrowing elected civilian governments (1969 and 1979 respectively). Suppression of civil liberties, economic decline and general despondency characterised the socio-economic situation in the country. This obviously affected the growth of tertiary education, as there were no new investments in the sector while existing facilities deteriorated because of lack of funds for maintenance.

Two major incidents that caused rapid retrogression to university education in Ghana occurred in the early eighties and mid-nineties respectively. In the first incident, student agitations for the return of civil rule to the country led to the then military government closing down the universities for an academic year. In the second incident, university lecturers to back their demand for better remuneration again closed down Ghanaian public universities for one more academic year in the mid-nineties following a strike action. These situations created a huge backlog of students desiring admission to the universities while a mass exodus of lecturers to other countries to seek “greener pastures” compounded the problem.

Back in 1983, the difficult economic situation prevailing in the country led the then military government to change its stance from the adoption of the populist/socialist ideology to seek assistance from the capitalist Breton Woods institutions – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Boafo-Arthur, 2007). The government adopted an imposed policy called Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) that had negative consequences for social interventions, particularly the hitherto free provision of university education to Ghanaian citizens. The focus of international development assistance, under this programme, shifted radically from emphasis on tertiary education to that of basic education (Akyeampong, 2010). One of the immediate outcomes of the SAP was the setting up of a University Rationalisation Committee (URC) in December 1986. The main objective of this committee was to; ‘provide the basic information and
recommendations to enable a medium-term university sector development plan to be formulated for Ghana’ (URC Final Report, 1988). The report summarised the crisis afflicting Ghanaian university education as follows:

- Lack of growth in enrolments over the past six years (1982-88);
- Fall in real expenditure levels by about a third;
- High faculty attrition rates resulting in high student-staff ratios;
- Non-availability of all types of teaching materials and inadequate provision of support services such as libraries; and
- Low morale in the universities that had undoubtedly affected the quality of teaching and learning negatively.

With a few exceptions, notably the recommendation for the creation of the National Accreditation Board, most of the recommendations of the URC sought to address the problem of access to tertiary education more than quality issues in that sector. Some of the recommendations included:

- Broadening the definition of tertiary education to include that of all post-secondary institutions;
- Better use of existing facilities, including de-emphasising residential facilities, to increase enrolments to the universities; and
- Keeping institutions open all-year round to enrol more students including part-time, evening and week-end students;
- Increasing avenues for generating additional incomes from internal sources.

Thus increasing enrolment figures became the prime concern of government, after the submission of the URC report in 1988 with the constant comparison of enrolment figures of the University of Ibadan (about 25,000 students then) as against that of the University of Ghana (about 3,000 students then) although both institutions were established almost simultaneously. Indeed, the URC had reported that enrolment figures represented only 0.7 per cent of the relevant age group at
university whereas a much higher rate of attendance was the case in many developing countries. In the late 1980s, over 50 per cent of the relevant age group in developed countries such as the US and South Korea, could hope to attend one form of tertiary institution or the other. Expansion in higher education enrolments in Europe followed closely later.

Certainly, the Ghanaian government was mindful of the fallout of the first closure of the universities and the backlog it had created of students waiting, for up to one year at home, to gain admission to the universities. Thus, although the government accepted the URC report that had recommended norms for student-staff ratios for the various academic disciplines, the same government’s policy of allocating funds based on student numbers all but defeated the URC’s quality intention in that regard.

2.2.2.3 Legal Environment

Two important developments came out of the government’s acceptance of the URC Report and the publication of a White Paper on it. First was the liberalization of provision of tertiary education to make room for private providers. The government, in its quest to increase access to tertiary education and also solve the problem of the backlog of students passed decrees establishing two new universities - the University for Development Studies (UDS) at Tamale in Northern Ghana in 1992 and the University College of Education at Winneba in the Central Region of Ghana in 1993. More importantly, private providers, who had the means, were granted permission to establish and operate tertiary education institutions to create more access to qualified applicants.

Secondly, the government passed a decree, towards the end of military rule in 1993, establishing the National Accreditation Board (NAB) to operate as the state regulatory and quality assurance body, to supervise and regulate the establishment and operation of all tertiary education institutions – both state- and private-owned.

The law establishing the NAB required both public and private tertiary institutions to seek accreditation, although the existing public institutions had their own specific legislations establishing them as autonomous entities. The government requested the two newest public university colleges – University College of Education, Winneba and the
Tarkwa School of Mines – to have their respective programmes assessed by NAB before passing legislation to grant them autonomy.

It was, however, not until the year 2005 that assessment of the programmes of the older public universities commenced. A number of factors accounted for the late start of the assessment of programmes of the older public universities.

Although the government passed the NAB Law in 1993, it was not until the year 2002 that regulations operationalizing the law were put in place in the form of a Legislative Instrument. The older conservative universities, which were noted for jealously guarding their autonomies, would have most probably, resorted to any means, including litigation, to resist this new “encroachment” on their territories by NAB without the necessary legal framework in place.

Secondly, NAB itself had very limited capacity to combine the assessment of the newly emerging private university colleges with the older and well-established public universities. Indeed, most of the programme panels constituted to assess the new institutions came from these older public universities. The latter also became the unofficial quality assurance agents of NAB in response to the requirement that private institutions seek affiliation with the autonomous universities.

Thirdly, most of the experts available for use by NAB as evaluators in Ghana were products of the older universities. Anecdotal parallels of this could be drawn from the United Kingdom where during the early years of quality assessments, evaluators had to be drawn from Oxford and Cambridge universities. In Ghana, almost all the engineers practising in the country during the period assessments commenced had had their first degrees in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi. NAB therefore sought to bring independent (foreign) experts who were also expected to bring their respective experiences on assessment to bear on the older public universities.

NAB, however, lacked the wherewithal – money for air tickets, allowances etc. – to implement this plan to meaningfully assess the public universities. This problem was partially solved when the government agreed to make budgetary provision through the Ghana Education Trust Fund (GETFund) to enable NAB to do a phased assessment of programmes of the public universities from the year, 2005.
The plan of action drawn by NAB for the assessment of the three older public universities entailed flying in experts, mainly from the United Kingdom, South Africa and Nigeria, to tackle programmes in Medicine, Engineering, Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the Physical Sciences in the first cycle in 2005-2006. The UK was chosen because as the former colonial power, Ghana’s education system was modelled on hers. South Africa was acknowledged as a “giant” in Africa in terms of tertiary education, and Nigeria had similar beginnings – same colonial relationship with U.K., and history of university education. Nigeria also had a better experience than Ghana in the practice of the accreditation enterprise.

In the second cycle of the exercise (2006-2007), experts from the three countries – for similar reasons, were brought in to assess programmes in Agricultural Sciences, Clinical Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences and Nursing. The third round of the project – 2007/2008 – embraced programmes in Law, Business, Nutrition and Food Science. The assessment exercises in the public universities were done concurrently with assessments of new and existing programmes, due for accreditation, in the other tertiary education institutions.

Various consequences arose out of the legal framework put in place to ensure increased access to tertiary education by Ghanaians. First was the increased competition for limited resources within the tertiary education environment. In the public sector alone, enrolment figures grew from 11,857 in the 1991/92 academic year, to 63,576 in the 2003/2004 academic year (Materu, 2007, p.16). Through indirect encouragement by the government, admission spaces were created for many of the disciplines which were in high demand (business programmes, for instance) and these were made fee-paying. Private provision was also concentrated in these programmes to meet the high demand. Thus, the public and private universities had to compete for both students and qualified and experienced staff, such as lecturers. Student loans, places for industrial attachments and employment opportunities after graduation were also areas where competition became intense.

Positive implications included better and easier access to university education, better opportunities for self-improvement by working people and hence better opportunities for career advancement. This was due to the flexible time tabling by the institutions, mainly meant to attract
students. Students were also able to make choices as to where they wanted to study.

Key stakeholders such as funding agencies, students and staff always requested to know the accreditation status of an institution before deciding to have any dealings with such an institution. This imposed additional responsibility on NAB to ensure that it kept abreast with current practices in assessment for accreditation exercises. NAB also had to put in mechanisms for effective quality monitoring to assure stakeholders that products coming out of Ghanaian universities were comparable, in terms of quality with their counterparts anywhere.