Chapter 9
Summary findings, conclusions and recommendations

9.1 Introduction and summary

The main objective of the study has been to determine the influence accreditation has had on the quality of Ghanaian universities after various cycles of assessments for that purpose. This was against the backdrop of the immense importance the concept of quality, and its assurance in higher education institutions, had assumed in the world. Thus, the general state of affairs in higher education before the concept of quality assurance gained popularity was first reviewed to set the stage for the study. Particular mention was made of increasing enrolments against the backdrop of decreasing budgets and some of the measures adopted by world governments to confront these challenges. This was then narrowed down to developments on the African higher education scene prior to the introduction of formal quality assurance measures. It was noted that Africa had its fair share of increased higher education enrolments especially for the period from 1985 onwards with enrolments increasing up to 3.6 times by the year 2002. More recent figures indicated that universities in many African countries were still experiencing a surge in their enrolments. For instance, between 2000 and 2010, higher education enrolments more than doubled, increasing from 2.3 million to 5.2 million (Africa-America Institute, 2015). Public investments, however, had been unable to keep up with the pace of enrolments, often times due to pressure from donor countries to cut down on such investments. As an alternative measure, African governments had decided to liberalise provision of tertiary education to bring in private investors. Figures cited from the literature indicated rapid growth in student enrolments in the public institutions, in many cases without regard to the capacity of existing facilities and qualified human resources. The involvement of private providers had brought in its trail the general perception of inferior provision. Rightly or wrongly, the general belief had been that their desire to quickly recoup their
investments and make profits made them relax on the rigours of quality required of higher education institutions.

This had been the main reason, and the genesis, for the establishment of regulatory bodies for higher education in Africa. Governments, in their desire to address the issues recounted, charged these bodies to ensure that increased demand for higher education and participation by private providers did not lead to compromises in the quality of provision. Towards that objective, regulatory bodies had been tasked to ensure that:

- Public higher education institutions stuck 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 was not used as a pretext by higher education institutions to provide services below established minimum standards.

- Demands for increased transparency and accountability were met by ensuring that resources provided by stakeholders (governments, parents, etc.) were used effectively and efficiently for their intended purpose to achieve value for money.

- Reforms were introduced to address new challenges – reorganizing higher education institutions (e.g. using new technologies) to expand access without compromising on quality and re-focussing their training and research activities to priority areas to speed up socio-economic development of their societies.

- Measures to ensure harmonization with global trends were put in place to ensure comparability, and therefore, continued recognition of qualifications and awards worldwide.
9.2 Research questions

The study sought to address the main research question: **Has accreditation made an impact on quality assurance in Ghanaian universities?**

The question was further broken down into three sub questions:

1. Has accreditation influenced the quality of specified indicators in Ghanaian universities after two or more cycles of assessments?

2. 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?

3. 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?

9.3 Research Design

The study utilised a cross-sectional analysis and a longitudinal approach for its investigation. This was based on the expectation that changes would likely occur in the identified variables between one cycle of assessments for accreditation and a subsequent one. Thus, in accord with the accreditation procedure, evaluators assessed and identified deficiencies in the studied indicators and provided suggestions for improvement. The suggestions provided by the evaluators, if implemented, were expected to correct the identified deficiencies and help improve their quality. Reports from subsequent assessments therefore, would likely show that there had been improvements, at least, over what prevailed in the previous situation.

The various data sources utilised for the study were evaluation reports and cross-sectional data from the survey of academics teaching on the assessed programmes and that of students’ that sought confirmation of the existence of accreditation requirements in their respective institutions.
9.4 Sample and Sampling Methodology

The study selected 64 academic programmes from seven, out of the nine, oldest public universities and four, out of the forty, oldest private universities in Ghana to address the first research question. These universities had undergone, at least, two cycles of assessments-for-accreditation between the years 2006 and 2015.

The selection of participating institutions in the study for the second research question was again based on such institutions having programmes that had undergone two cycles of evaluations for accreditation between 2006 and 2015. Secondary data from two latest evaluation reports – one from a cycle of assessment and the other from the succeeding cycle – were selected for analysis. Note should be taken of the fact that the public universities had very large student numbers ranging from 15,000 to 50,000 as at the time of the study while the largest private university had a maximum student population of 3,000. The public universities, with a much longer period of existence had a wider variety of study programmes than the private universities. Efforts were however made to select a fair balance of study programmes from similar categories to enable a good comparison between the two types of universities. Thus, 40 programmes were selected from the public institutions and 24 programmes from the private institutions. The private institutions had a tendency of starting with programmes with fewer overhead costs, thus they had a large concentration of Business and Computer Science programmes. These programmes were mostly common to both public and private institutions while programmes in the basic sciences were mostly found in the public institutions. Basic science programmes were grouped under the broad heading of Science and Technology and this also accommodated programmes in Computer Science, Information Technology and Engineering. Similarly, Business and Arts programmes were classified under Humanities. Thirty-one (31) programmes were thus categorised under Science and Technology while 33 programmes fell under the Humanities.

The next stage involved eliciting the views (through questionnaires) of all academics, who had taught during the two assessment periods, on their perception of changes that had occurred in the selected indicators between the two periods. Of the 288 academics involved, 202 were actually reached out of which, based on comparative staff numbers, 147 were selected from the public universities and 55 from the private
universities. Eighty-two academics from the public universities, constituting a response rate of 56 per cent, provided responses to the administered questionnaires while 43 academics, out of 55 constituting a response rate of 78 per cent responded from the private universities. One hundred and twenty-five (125) academics in total constituting a response rate of 62 per cent, provided responses to the questionnaire and these were selected from all ranks - professors, senior lecturers, and lecturers – the only proviso being that their departments or courses they taught had undergone at least two cycles of assessments for accreditation and they had been at post then.

For the study on students’ perspectives on accreditation impact, 1,300 students (from the approximately 350,000 university student population in Ghana) were randomly selected from six (out of the 9) public universities and five (out of the 60) private universities in Ghana. It should be noted that 70 per cent of Ghana’s university student population were enrolled in the public universities as at the time of the study. One thousand and one hundred students – made up of 63 per cent public and 37 per cent private university - provided responses.

These students were reading various programmes, at various degree levels –bachelor, master and doctoral– in the sciences and in the humanities. The selected students strode across second- through to fourth-year of undergraduate study as well as those in the graduate studies’ category.

9.5 Research methods

Changes – for better or worse - that had been seen in the indicators studied between the two assessment-cycles were taken from the evaluation reports. Quantitative tests regarding those changes in the indicators were conducted to address the first research question. Secondary data, collected from reports submitted by evaluators on the five key indicators assessed for accreditation, were statistically analysed to address the study’s second research question.

9.6 Instrumentation

The respective opinions of academics and students, in research questions two and three, were solicited through questionnaires. The structured questionnaires for the academics contained 35 items
(Appendix 1) while those for the students, that took more of the form of a customer satisfaction survey, contained nine items (Appendix 2).

9.7 Issues of validity and reliability

Churchill’s (1979) seven-step approach guided the development and administration of questionnaires utilised for the study. While conceding that robust statistical measures of reliability were not used, other measures such as pretesting of the questionnaires using face validity and undeclared pre-testing methods were employed. For the face validity, expert advice to scrutinize and improve the questionnaires for example, was sought. The quality and wording of the questionnaires were also improved after pretesting them on academics and students separately in two different universities from the selected sample. Falling on the recommendations by Weinberg et al. (2002) on the assessment of reliability in research, the responses to the pretested questionnaires from the two institutions were compared to remove any inconsistencies in wording, for instance. Measures to assure validity were instituted by, for instance, comparing responses to questions asked in opposites. This pretesting procedure allowed for the identification and rectification of a few errors and deficiencies in the structure of the questionnaires including clarification of ambiguous questions or wording and unclear instructions.

9.8 Data collection procedure

The separate reports from two cycles of assessments – a first cycle and the succeeding one - on the selected programmes were retrieved from files for compilation of the relevant information. Information compiled from the evaluators’ reports consisted mainly of the ratings scored on the chosen indicators - curriculum structure, student class sizes, library facilities, physical facilities and funding. Particular note was taken of the evaluators’ recommendations for the correction of identified deficiencies in the quality of the indicators in the first cycle assessment reports. In the second cycle evaluation reports, the extent of implementation of the recommendations from the first cycle assessments and the current state of the indicators, as noted by the evaluators, were compiled.
With the written permission from heads of the selected institutions, questionnaires were administered, at different times, to academics and students respectively. These two categories of respondents were selected through the specified sampling procedure as outlined above, from the participating public and private universities.

The use of survey methods in the collection of data from academics and students for the study presented some advantages. These included the ability to sample the views of a cross section of the population that helped to establish differences and similarities between subgroups, for instance those between private and public university students. The procedure also allowed for the examination of relationships between variables. In this study, subjects, especially students, completed questionnaires mostly in the presence of research assistants and this provided the added advantage of yielding good response rates as well as providing clarifications, whenever respondents sought any. The survey method enabled the probing of the background of respondents to ensure, for instance, that only academics who had been present in their institutions for, at least, two cycles of assessments, participated in the study.

The advantages recounted notwithstanding, the (direct) survey method employed was more expensive and time consuming when compared with other survey methods such as phone in, responses by mail and, or online. The adopted method was a limiting factor for a wider sample coverage.

9.9 Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized for the cleaning process, running frequencies of items to remove illogical or impossible responses and the cross-checking of responses from individual questionnaires to ensure that only the requisite data was entered.

The three sets of data from – evaluation reports, academics’ responses and students’ responses to questionnaires – were analysed quantitatively using assessments such as descriptive statistics of central tendency and spread measures. The evaluators’ reports were further analysed using non-parametric tests of comparison such as the Wilcoxon Sign Rank test while applying the normal approximations to the test because of the large sample size. On the aggregate level (of all
the indicators) the paired sample t-test was employed to test for the hypothesised difference – specifically to help determine the significance of improvements in the indicators from one cycle of assessments to the succeeding one. The differences in the significance levels between the public and private universities were also determined.

The academics’ perception survey was expected to reflect the impact of accreditation on the two institutional categories, hence the tests were mainly on proportions – using chi square – for the respective frequencies of responses. These responses pertained to the indicated degree of implementation of accreditation directives and, or recommendations for improvement, made by evaluators to the institutions.

Responses from students were analysed using relative frequencies on selected features such as quality of information on course outlines, quality of physical facilities and class sizes. These pieces of information were essentially, to confirm or deny the existence of requirements specified by the accreditation procedure in its instruments (Annex 1). The statistical tests conducted in the study on students’ perspectives on accreditation, were mainly non-parametric, involving chi-square analysis and Mann-Whitney U Test.

9.10 Findings: Results of hypotheses
The first research sub question was: Has accreditation influenced the quality of specified indicators in Ghanaian universities after two or more cycles of assessments? To address the question, the following hypothesis was formulated and tested:

Input indicators assessed for accreditation in universities will improve from one assessment cycle to a succeeding one.

The objective was to find out whether, between a first assessment cycle and the subsequent one, there were any changes – improvement or deterioration - in the specified indicators. Secondly, it was to determine whether improvements, if there was any, could be linked to the implementation, by the institutions, of recommendations by evaluators during the first assessment. The underlying assumption, if that link could be established, would be that the accreditation procedure had made a positive impact on the institutions that showed improvement in their indicators.
The results from the statistical tests conducted by the study showed varying degrees of overall improvements in the curriculum, library and staffing indicators during the second assessment cycle over that of the first. There were however some intervening factors that caused the improvements in some of the indicators not to become so apparent.

For instance, in the case of the academic staff, although the figures showed nominal increases in the majority of the various ranks, high student enrolment numbers, especially in the well-patronized study programmes negated any obvious improvement from the first to the second cycle assessments. The student/staff ratios (SSR) thus remained high over and above the accreditation procedure’s prescribed norms. The positive news though, fell in the area of compliance with the requirement that only academics of ranks not below Senior Lecturer be selected as heads of departments. For this requirement, a significant improvement (92 per cent) was recorded at the second assessment cycle as against what prevailed at the first cycle (78 per cent).

The study’s second sub-question was: **Were there differential impacts of accreditation measures on the public and private universities in Ghana, between two evaluations in the period 2006-2012 and what might have accounted for any such differences?**

The prime objective of this study was to find out whether there had been improvements in five key indicators that had to meet threshold standards before an institution and its programmes were approved for accreditation in Ghana. It was also to determine how any such improvements compared between public and private universities.

The study, to answer the second research question, found a significant improvement in the overall assessment scores in the reports for both categories of universities at the second cycle assessments. A test of comparison between the two categories of universities indicated the public universities achieving better scores (i.e. more improvement) than their private university counterparts.

A survey of the opinions of academics teaching in each of the categories of universities was conducted to confirm the extent of implementation of recommendations for improvement made by the first cycle evaluators in their respective institutions and programmes. Varying responses, ranging from full implementation to non-implementation, were provided by the respondents. Academics in the private universities indicated more follow-up actions on the
recommendations for improvement than those in the public universities. This could be due to the fact that private universities had more ‘catching-up’ to do as a result of their relatively inexperienced academic staff, among others.

For the study to answer the latter part of the research question, we determined whether academics linked their views of improvement in their institutions to accreditation measures. Respondents selected responses from the following fields in the questionnaires. That their institutions underwent assessments for accreditation mainly:

- For the attraction of funding,
- For the attraction of good students,
- For the attraction of qualified and experienced teaching staff,
- For the institution of quality education and,
- To comply with legislation.

Respondents, from both the public and private universities, indicated what they perceived to be the main reasons for seeking accreditation in the following order (the most important first):

1. Improvement in the quality of education;
2. Compliance with legislation;
3. Attraction of qualified teaching staff;
4. Attraction of good students;
5. Attraction for funding.

In the views of Ghanaian academics, in both public and private institutions therefore, accreditation played a role first of all, and indeed, had an impact on the quality development of their universities. It is interesting to note that a study among Portuguese academics indicated comparable result in the support for improvement as the main agenda for quality assessment of higher education (M.J. Rosa et al., 2012).

The third research question was: 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?

The objective of the study was to verify whether the institutions were adhering to the accrediting body’s requirements, especially those that related directly to students’ learning experience, from students of the institutions.

Student respondents, from both the public and private universities, confirmed varying degrees of conformity and, or compliance with the Ghanaian accrediting agency’s requirements by the universities under its regulation. In overall terms, however, respondents from the public universities indicated better levels of conformity than those from their counterparts in the private universities.

A possible explanation to account for the better compliance levels by the public universities, according to the students’ responses, would include the fact that the older public universities, especially those whose establishment predated that of the accrediting body, had self-regulatory structures. These structures, replicated from institutions that had mentored those public universities at their inception, gave them a head start at imbibing the acceptable norms of operation. Additionally, the public universities had better resources to enable them to engage in cultural interactions/exchanges with other institutions outside the country. These normative interactions served as platforms for learning and acculturating current and acceptable norms. Thus, the public universities were already used to, and were compliant with most of the requirements put in place by the external regulatory agency.

9.11 Main research question

The main research question of this study - Has accreditation made an impact on quality assurance in Ghanaian universities – could be answered when linked to the conclusions of the three sub-questions (published as articles) of the research. Conclusions from the first article showed general improvements in the studied specified input indicators, at a second assessment over that of the first cycle. The indication by the evaluators at the second cycle assessments was that their earlier recommendations for improvement had been implemented in all the cases where improvements had been observed. To that extent, the conclusion could be drawn that the accreditation system had made an impact on quality development of the universities in Ghana.
The next article, that covered the second research question provided conclusions that projected the status of the universities – public/private – as major explanatory factors for the level of improvement in the institutions. The motivation to pursue improvements specified by the accrediting body, and beyond that, was discussed in the article. The study concluded that isomorphic pressures on both public and private universities in Ghana informed their motivation to seek improvements under accreditation measures. These pressures were differentially applied and, or felt differentially by the two university types. While the private universities were subjected to all three – coercive, normative and mimetic – isomorphic pressures, which often came simultaneously, the motivation for undergoing accreditation by the public universities were mostly due to coercive isomorphism arising out of legislation.

The third article which addressed the last research sub-question sought to confirm the conclusions of the two previous sub-questions, from students’ perspectives, especially with regard to matters that were related to students’ learning experience. Although the accrediting procedures’ measures were mainly geared towards ensuring and improving students’ learning experiences, students had minimal participation in the accrediting body’s evaluation processes. While exclusion of students from the evaluation processes might not be described as an international best quality assurance practice, the advantage to this study was that students’ responses could be seen as essentially candid to the extent that they had no prior direct involvement in the accrediting body’s assessment processes.

Student responses indeed confirmed improvements in the various indicators on which their opinions were sought, with those from the public-owned universities slightly indicating better improvements than their private university counterparts. The marked exception, however, was in the area of student enrolments where the public universities, especially, far exceeded the specified norms by the accrediting body and continued to do so notwithstanding remarks in the accreditation reports.

Possible explanations to this development could be traced to any or all of factors such as the relatively low fees charged by the state-supported public universities and the ‘entitlement mentality’ of the tax-paying citizenry. Others were the image acquired by the public
universities over the years and political pressure exerted by the authorities on them to increase enrolments.

Conclusions from the three sub-research questions, therefore, essentially support the fact that there had been improvements in the universities and their programmes going by the input indicators studied. Some of the facilitative measures in this regard, derived from the compliance provisions of the legal regime that required all universities and their programmes to be accredited before commencing or continuing to operate in Ghana. Also deriving from legislation was the empowerment of the accrediting body to possibly revoke the accreditation of a university that was not maintaining the requisite standards or even improving on them. Additionally, in the event of stagnation or inadequate improvement in standards, as adjudged by the accrediting agency, a university – mainly the private ones – might never be permitted to be autonomous in the award of its own qualifications.

These measures had provided the accrediting body with the muscle to enable it to have an impact on the quality development of Ghanaian universities. This appeared to be a good beginning for a fledgling quality assurance system such as that instituted by the Ghanaian accrediting body. The caution thrown by authorities such as Horsburgh (1999) however, must be held in view. The author, it would be recalled had cautioned that a good quality evaluation system must go beyond systems, input and output factors only. For now, the Ghanaian accrediting system was yet to go beyond those factors and thus, to that extent, one could not categorically attribute all improvements observed, solely to the institution of accreditation measures.

It would also not be easy to estimate the magnitude of the role played by the Ghanaian accreditation procedure, which was relatively at a nascent stage of existence, in these improvements. That the accreditation procedure played an influential role, however, seems likely. For the future, it would be helpful to keep track of further improvements in the universities and link them to specific roles played by the accreditation system for purposes of consistency, over a longer period of time, to establish the system’s impact with little doubt.

9.12 Linking theory with the study

Stensaker & Lieber (2015) cite J.P. Olsen as positing that the involvement of higher education institutions in the dynamics of change
has the potential power to transform their institutional identity with respect to purpose, work practices, organization, governance as well as the relationship with and role in the socio-political and economic system. The consequent reforms in higher education’s operations have been driven by the belief in the pivotal role such institutions are expected to play in the knowledge economy. As had been the case in Ghana (please see the chapter on Environment Scan) these system level reforms in higher education are often initiated by governments often as part of general public sector reforms. These have been related, in the European context, to the changing role of the state (Neave, 2012 cf. de Boer et al., 2017). These externally driven and largely global dynamics of change are based on several factors, which include the demise of the welfare state, the commodification of knowledge and the massification of higher education. Thus, authors such as Ferlie et al (2008) have stated that the transformations experienced in higher education are similar to those experienced by other key public services. They can therefore be understood as a redefinition of the role of the nation state in the public generally. As centres devoted to higher learning, universities are by nature at the centre of policy interests and are, as such, under constant pressure from national and regional stakeholders (Karjalainen et al, 2006). Reforms in university systems and structures have culminated in changes that have made academics and their institutions vulnerable just like other institutions set up for utilitarian objectives. Additionally, society demands accountability (which increases vulnerability) for spending tax money (in the public sector, including public universities) or wants to be protected from sham universities (mostly in the private sector).

In the words of Henkel, ‘previously taken-for-granted academic ideologies now compete with Managerialism and neo-liberalism in the university as a corporate enterprise’ (Henkel, 2004). Some of these changes have led to increases in the numbers of students, academic staff, and the demand for universities to be run like other service-providing organizations.

Neo-Institutional theorists are interested in the processes by which items become institutionalized and the role institutions play in the society (Scott, 1987). In applying the theory to higher education, the study seeks to provide an understanding as to how concepts such as accreditation and quality assurance, came to be accepted as contributors
to organizational quality, stability and sustainability (Enders & Westerheijden, 2014). These have been influenced by reforms championed by the imported concept of New Public Management with its stress on strong performance measurement, monitoring and management systems and the growth of audit systems (Ferlie et al, 2008). These usually inform the evaluation processes leading to the grant of accreditation. The accreditation system has been institutionalized to provide assurance to stakeholders that universities that had been evaluated by the established authorities and accredited, meet some quality and therefore have to be accepted as legitimate (Martin et al, 2007).

Three levels of legitimacy are sought by universities all over the world. First, they find themselves operating in an increasingly internationalizing and globalizing environment (Van Damme, 2001). Indeed, they define themselves as the heirs and safeguards of universalistic traditions in the history of mankind. These universalistic pretensions, notwithstanding, universities institutionally, have grown up within their particular national frameworks and have established specific national educational systems, regulations and procedures, adapted to meet the needs of the domestic economy and culture (Van Damme, 2001). Secondly, therefore, the university has to adapt its universalistic mission to national rules and local circumstances. For instance, societal challenges faced by universities all over the world, including perhaps the most important one of transformation towards a mass higher education system, have taken place within the context of the national environment. With many of these universities, especially those from developing countries highly dependent on national governments for their budgets, they have to conform to, and comply with nationally-established norms and regulations (for instance, on quality assurance, funding etc.) in order to achieve political legitimacy. Thirdly, universities are located in specific towns/regions in the country with its own local/regional economies and cultures. Many universities derive their resources, including students, from their immediate environs. The importance, therefore, of attracting legitimacy from their localities cannot be overemphasized.

The foregoing helps to understand the background that encourages procedures to be adopted to institutionalize practices such as accreditation and quality assurance in the universities (Scott & Meyer,
1994). It must be clarified that the adopted theories may not be able to assist to explain the findings of the study with respect to why precisely improvements in some but not in all indicators were observed in the universities and their programmes. What they do is to help in understanding why the accrediting system’s role had made some impact on the institutions even if their responses to the system’s measures have had to come involuntarily or otherwise. The neo-institutional approaches and the resource dependency theory were thus searched for to provide more meaningful and more informative explanations. These are reviewed in the following sections.

9.12.1 Institutional Theory

This theory, with its isomorphic mechanisms, has been used in this study to explain how regulatory systems such as those of accreditation had been established and institutionalized to ensure minimum standards and accountability by the universities. On the part of the universities, their quest for universal acceptability and legitimacy had driven them to adopt practices perceived to have made similar institutions more successful and legitimate. Indeed, with regard to developing countries, Meyer (1981) had succinctly stated that, it is easy to predict the organization of a newly emerging nation’s administration without knowing anything about the nation itself. He continued that, “peripheral nations are far more isomorphic – in administrative form and economic pattern – than any theory of the world system of economic division of labour would lead one to expect” (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 152).

Extending the moral of Meyer’s statement to the field of higher education, it is easy to understand why currently, the concept of accreditation, and other quality assurance measures attract lots of attention in many institutions in developing countries. Isomorphism, in all its forms – normative, mimetic and coercive – arising out of institutional theory, helps in understanding why. Institutions from developing countries obviously have to put in extra efforts to merit recognition and acceptability than those from the developed economies.

From the results of the study, it is evident that private universities, more than the public universities, by reason of legislation and the accreditation agency’s processes, had to contend with all isomorphic pressures – coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism – in
compliance with the accreditation measures. These pressures, in the main, were exerted simultaneously and in an overlapping manner. Note should be taken of the fact that the establishment and operation of private universities was a relatively new development at the time of the study. In that regard, proprietors of those institutions had a lot more to do in meeting requirements such as in the areas of physical, administrative and governance structures. These therefore, accounted for the greater isomorphic pressures exerted on the private universities.

In the case of the public universities, the isomorphic pressures that informed the reason for their compliance with accreditation measures were mainly coercive (legislation). This was followed by normative isomorphism through compliance with the broad norms of the accreditation procedure and their interaction with foreign colleagues and literature.

As stated in chapter four of this thesis, the original objective of the neo-institutional theory was not that of explaining why institutions adopted measures to improve or enhance their quality. We are reminded that the theory was borrowed – in the absence of any relevant accreditation theory – to explain why, and the extent to which Ghanaian universities complied with prescribed measures by the country’s accrediting agency meant for that purpose. Generally, one could conclude that the various forms of isomorphic pressures exerted on the universities compelled them to comply with the measures put in place by the accrediting agency in Ghana. The exception perhaps might be that of normative isomorphism. The universities, it must be stated unequivocally, had no choice but to submit themselves and their programmes for evaluation for accreditation because it was required of them by law to do so. Obviously, isomorphic pressures alone and in themselves, were not enough to inspire the universities, especially the private ones, to go beyond the minimum standards specified by the accrediting body to assure quality development in the institutions and their programmes. If that were so the private universities, which the findings indicated were subjected to all three forms – normative, coercive and mimetic – of isomorphic pressures, simultaneously and in an overlapping manner, would have achieved better results, in terms of the quality development of the studied indicators than that shown by the (study’s) findings. Efforts by the private universities to maintain or improve their input indicators were, perhaps only aimed at satisfying
the accrediting procedure in order to retain their accreditation to operate rather than a genuine effort to ensure quality development.

An interesting observation about authors who had written about the attributes of the neo-institutional theory was that none of them wrote about the imposition of those attributes on particular institutions. For instance, Rhoades and Sporn (2002) wrote about isomorphism being the importation and internalization of approved processes, techniques, ceremonies and ideas from the external environment and the concept being associated with organizational success. Earlier on, Bloland (1994) had also written about the concept being about convincing internal and external monitors of an organization to change course by adopting externally approved structures and activities to enable the organization become more legitimate. To DiMaggio & Powell (1991) and Meyer & Scott (1983) the theory was about the need to maintain a fit between an organization’s practices and those within the environment regarded as legitimate to achieve success. While these writers stressed on isomorphism aiming at achieving success, attracting resources and achieving legitimacy, none of them wrote about its imposition by external agencies for that purpose. The assumption therefore, is that organizations became isomorphic or adopted measures to become more and more isomorphic out of their own volition or out of pragmatism rather than out of deliberate pressures imposed on them by external bodies. This study however, shows that by requiring the private universities to affiliate to the chartered public universities for purposes of supervision, an isomorphic pressure, not borne out by the private universities’ voluntary and genuine desire for improvement was foisted on them by the accreditation procedure.

9.12.2 Resource Dependency Theory

The discernible tenet from the Resource Dependency Theory that was of interest to this study is about the concept of power and the influence those who possess it wield over other organizations in a competitive environment. In a simplified form, universities exchange resources with their environments. Resources come in various forms – grants and subventions from public and private sources, technology, relevant human resources, etc. These resources are limited and must be competed for with other organizations in the environment, which may have equal or better claims to similar resources. The products coming
out of the universities – graduates, research results, etc. – must also fit the quality or specification for which elements in the environment are willing to exchange resources required by the universities. The starting point for determining this fit, it would appear, is the institution undergoing assessment towards the grant of accreditation.

There are increasingly stringent demands from stakeholders who provide the resources for the sustenance of the universities in the environment. These include the demand for the introduction of practices such as New Public Management in the administration of the universities by governments, more accountability and quality by parents and employers (Ferlie et al, 2008).

Universities require resources such as financial grants, good academic and administrative staff and students from their environments while they provide outputs such as graduates and research results in exchange. These activities must be discharged constantly and often in competition with others, to ensure their legitimacy and sustainability. Regulatory regimes are established to ensure that the universities’ operations conform to certain minimum standards and the resources put in such operations are appropriately utilized for set purposes. It is when a determination is made by relevant stakeholders that those set purposes are being achieved that the regulatory bodies can also be said to be making a meaningful impact on the activities of the regulated institutions. The universities, in this case, knowing that they rely on the resources of their environments to survive will also seek to conform to the regulations put in place by the regime. Thus, universities undergo assessments for accreditation in order to have access to resources – governmental or private – and for their products to be accepted into the world of work.

The accrediting procedure in Ghana takes the availability and quality of various resources to the universities into consideration before deciding on the grant of accreditation for them to operate.

Ghanaian universities, like many others in Africa, have been badly hit by the migration of qualified personnel from the country to the developed world for what had been called ‘greener pastures’. Indeed most of these universities find it extremely difficult to attract and retain academic staff in the required numbers for disciplines such as medicine, engineering and technology and yet these are areas that the country needs human resources most to develop. There is intense competition
for the few that are left in the country by the many universities that had been established by both the state and private providers, mainly to address the hunger for university education. Universities likely to have a head start in this competition for limited human resources would foremost be those that would be in good standing with the regulatory (accrediting) agency. With state support and the relative job security as well as better remuneration, public universities in Ghana had an advantage over their private university counterparts in the competition for qualified human resources. They were also able to venture into the running of programmes, which required higher overhead costs such as in the sciences and technological fields, and had better access to resources required to meet the set standards of the accreditation procedure.

Thus, situated within the framework of the Resource Dependency Theory, the public universities controlled the lion’s share of needed physical and human resources that enabled them to exercise power relations over the private universities. A form of this power relation came in the provision of mentoring services to the private universities as required by the accreditation procedure. The private universities, on their part, were able to hire mainly newly qualified young and inexperienced academic and administrative staff that ‘condemned’ them to serving under mentorship – as was required by the accreditation procedure - of the chartered public universities for a long period.

In the competition for good students, including international students, the reputation of the public universities acquired both locally and internationally over the years coupled with state support enabled them to have a head start against their private university counterparts. After admitting the permitted quota of students, who enjoyed heavily subsidized fees by the state, the public universities were also allowed to admit full fee-paying students provided the university had the requisite facilities. These students did not enjoy any state subsidies on their fees and their payments helped the public universities to cover budgetary shortfalls from the state.

Increasingly becoming veritable sources of income for the universities, both public and private, were also fees from international students either recruited directly from neighbouring countries or through ‘links’ arrangements mainly between the public universities and foreign counterparts (usually from the United States). The public
universities had a competitive edge with such student recruitments due to factors already recounted above. The public universities thus had better financial resources that enabled them to, among others, offer a broader spectrum of courses and in some instances, institute financial support for brilliant but needy students.

Private universities, unlike their public university counterparts, had to look for resources to finance their activities such as provision of physical facilities and remuneration for their staff. Most of them hoped to recoup the investments made from the single source of fee payments by students. Public universities on the other hand, had fewer challenges to contend with as costs like staff emoluments were met by the state which also provided grants for their infrastructural requirements. Additionally, public universities were able to attract funding for research and set up facilities such as centres of excellence, from international organizations, which enhanced their operations as world-class institutions. This was largely unavailable to the private universities.

The relevance of the Resource Dependency Theory to the study relates to how competition for and dependence on particular actors in a university’s environment for resources pressurize the university to comply with regulations such as those set by an accrediting body. The universities were aware that obtaining accreditation for the institution and their programmes was necessary, as students would enquire about that status before they enrolled. Accreditation was also a condition for having access to financial resources, whether in the form of grants or loans. Dependence on the accreditation procedure for open doors to human and financial resources by the universities was therefore not in doubt. The question then is, to what extent did this competition for limited resources directly or indirectly contribute or lead the universities to adopt measures – including those from the accrediting procedure – to improve quality in their institutions? This is where we look at the responses from the sampled academics on their perception of their universities’ reasons for seeking accreditation. The academics ranked improvement in quality education as their first choice but the closeness of their scores for this reason with those for the attraction of resources – both physical and human – most probably points to the direction of the ‘one good turn deserves another’ approach in the responses. It can be safely assumed that, in their minds’ eyes, the
adoption of measures geared towards quality improvement might enhance their institutions’ competitiveness for resource acquisition.

9.12.3 Comparison between the relevance of the two theories

The two theories share in the common description of how organizations face competition for the acquisition of resources in their environments. Such organizations may fall on the assistance of other actors whose activities, they believe, could positively influence the affected organizations within their environments. In the case of higher education institutions, examples of such actors would be accrediting bodies and funding agencies. The difference between the theories lay in the explanations they proffer on why the activities of other actors have an impact on organizations within the environment (Hessels & Terjesen, 2010; Cairns et al, 2005). Resource dependency theory argues that dependence on other actors relates to the need for resources while institutional theory predicts that organizations are inclined to imitate the behavioural norms of other actors in the field. The conclusions from both arguments obviously could be used to explain why universities – public and private – act in particular ways. It would appear not farfetched to presume that, in their expected responses to the accrediting agency’s demands, the ultimate objective is to ‘command’ or ‘control’ as much resources as possible from their respective environments to enhance their competitive edge. Thus, the expected behaviour of both the public and private universities – in the extent to which they go to comply with the accrediting agency’s demands and, or their imitation of the ways of other universities they perceive to be more successful – is hypothesized to be conditioned on the expected rewards they hope to reap. These rewards include those that make the operation of the institutions sustainable and competitive and may come in the form of human resources (excellent academic and administrative staff and students) and access to various other resources such as funding.

Looking at the two theories, it would appear that the Resource Dependency Theory gave a better insight as to why Ghanaian universities sought and obtained accreditation to operate. As had already been stated elsewhere in this thesis, the supply of human resources, especially highly qualified and experienced academics and administrators was highly elastic in Ghana. The public universities, with state support, were better able to attract those available in the
country than the private universities. Payment of staff emoluments by the state had however, come at the expense of other budgetary allocations for running costs in the public universities, which therefore had to adopt other means to raise funds for that purpose. A fundamental condition for advancing funds – loans, grants, fees, etc. – was the accreditation status of the university, whether public or private. The public universities, unlike the situation before liberalization of provision of university education now had to compete, especially for, qualified but, full fee-paying students to meet their extra expenditures.

The situation was even worse for the private universities, which had to provide their own physical infrastructure in addition to meeting staff emoluments and payment of affiliation fees to the public (mentoring) universities, all from expected fee payments from students they attracted in competition with the public universities. Their struggle to stay afloat in the tertiary education enterprise and, possibly wean themselves off the mentorship of the public universities amidst very difficult circumstances, pressurize them to comply as much as possible with the accreditation measures.

The resource dependency theory assists in explaining current behaviour of the universities vis-à-vis compliance with the accrediting body’s measures. It could however, not help in anticipating whether universities would continue to strive for quality improvement when their circumstances change with regard to competition for resources. From the point of view of Economics however, competition for resources will never end. Therefore the likelihood of the theory enduring in explaining circumstances such as had just been recounted is very real. In the case of the neo-institutional theory, the aspect of isomorphic pressure that would have perhaps given an idea of what would motivate the universities to be interested in quality development is normative isomorphism. Coercive isomorphism gives the impression of an external imposition instead of an inner desire for improvement while by the accrediting body’s affiliation requirement, mimetic isomorphic pressure turns into a coercive one on the private universities.

Indeed, unlike the past when universities globally exercised authority over their own evaluation in quality matters, things have changed substantially in contemporary times (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014). Like the utility services - water, electricity and
telecommunications – for instance, higher education has increasingly come under the regulatory functions of agencies such as accreditation boards for purposes such as standards setting, monitoring and enforcement to secure behaviour modification (Carroll, 2014; King, 2007). Watchers of quality assurance in higher education see the concept as a tool of politics of surveillance serving as an instrument of accreditation and a mechanism for compliance (Jarvis, 2014; Engebretsen et al, 2012; Lucas, 2014). Although this situation has been variously criticized by some academics as an unnecessary intrusion to academic autonomy, others see the establishment of accrediting bodies as a means of checking fraudulent provision and ensuring a modicum of comparability with academic provision and qualifications awarded anywhere.

It is in this light that the accreditation procedure in Ghana is seen as a key player in contemporary higher education quality assurance. Indeed Ghana’s external quality assurance system is ranked as one of the well-established on the continent (Njoku, 2012; Kigotho, 2013) The impact the accreditation system has made on Ghanaian universities may thus be attributed, first to the overarching support provided by the state – in the form of legislation, and the institutions’ quest for the needed resources – physical and human – to survive and be legitimate in their environment. It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to conclude as to whether the universities, by themselves, and without competition would have had an innate desire to strive for quality development. This is mainly because there is no such case of Ghanaian higher education without accreditation. The data seem to suggest that, at least private universities try to satisfy the accreditation agency’s minimum requirements in order to continue to exist, with little urge to go beyond that. This, perhaps, could be attributed to lack of requisite resources (expertise, time) to do more than was strictly necessary. This appears to go against the liberal view that competition always creates quality.

To the extent that the evaluation process in Ghana, and in Africa in most cases, concentrated on input factors and the fact that most of the new universities were not operating very differently from the older ones, the findings of the study could be mostly generalized to all universities on the continent as at the time of the study. Indeed Ghana’s system of affiliation – by new universities to older ones – appear to be appealing to some African countries which had thus made enquiries
about the possibility of having the system replicated in their countries. Information from the Ghanaian accrediting body suggests that there is a marked decline in the initial rush to establish private universities after the liberalization of provision by the authorities. No scientific study had been done to estimate the real demand for university education while there appeared to be a saturation of the few employment avenues to absorb graduates coming out of the many universities that had been established. Student enrolments, even in the public universities had begun to decline leading to speculation that some universities might close down due to inability to endure the competition for students. It must also be noted that the accrediting body was beginning to intensify and diversify its evaluation methods, learning from its association with external counterparts from both Europe and the United States. A replication of the study in future would therefore likely produce not so similar results.

9.13 Future study

It would be interesting to replicate the study in a decade or two from the time of this study to determine whether the conclusions would be similar or substantially different from the current one. Apart from the fact that the accreditation system might have, hopefully, brought in further improvements in its own operations, private universities might also have grown in maturity in terms of expansion of programmes and autonomy in their operations. It would be knowledge enhancing to see how the findings of such a future study would look like in such circumstances - having the benefit of sampling a larger number and a wider variety of programmes from both categories of universities. The greater number of assessment cycles the universities, especially the public ones, would have undergone might also help in a genuine longitudinal study, establishing clear trends of impact accreditation might have had on the quality of programmes run by the institutions.

Perhaps, in the future, private universities that had survived their initial challenges and achieved autonomy could turn around the tide of isomorphic pressures in order to provide real challenge to the public universities. Such a challenge may go to the ultimate advantage of students and the country if it results in further improvements in the universities and the programmes they offer. For instance, an intense competition for resources, both human and material, on a near equal
footing, may be in accord with the resource dependency theory, in translating into more quality outcomes for both categories of universities. In a such changed Ghanaian context, and based on the resource dependency theory, it may be hypothesized that: If the competition for limited resources by the public universities and their private counterparts is on equal or near-equal footing, it will inure to the benefit of quality development for both types of universities.

With respect to neo-institutionalism, it may be hypothesized that: If the pressures of isomorphism are unequally exerted on the public universities and their private counterparts, quality development may be adversely affected in one or both categories of universities.

A future study may wish to consider broadening the sample size to include other stakeholders such as registrars and accountants. It would be interesting to know their views on the implementation strategies of the accreditation measures and their perspectives on the impact they have on the quality development of their institutions. Information on the quality of students admitted, trends in examinations results for the period an institution has been accredited may better be provided by a university administrator such as a registrar. So would one expect the health of the universities’ finances under accreditation to be better provided by accountants of the institutions. Finally, it would be helpful for a future study to assess impact to include some form of tracer study and an interaction with employers where graduates from the accredited universities are working to determine satisfaction with their performance. If employers are satisfied with the performance of graduates from particular institutions, then those institutions will have a head start in the competition for resources such as students and funds in consonance with the resource dependency theory.

9.14 Lessons from study

The Ghanaian, and for that matter African accrediting bodies, and the higher education institutions they regulate have some lessons to learn from this study. For the regulatory agencies, it would be important for them to revisit periodically the main reasons why they had been set up and do some assessment to determine whether they were achieving their objectives. Earlier in the study, the main objectives for the regulatory bodies’ establishment were identified as:
1. Ensuring that the existing state universities stuck to their core mandate of training high calibre human resources for the development of their countries;

2. Regulating the new, mainly private, higher education providers to prevent ‘rogue’ provision and,

3. Ensuring comparability between the qualifications awarded with others legitimately awarded and obtained elsewhere.

Achieving these objectives will definitely require new and better ways of regulating higher education than assessing input factors although it had been a good beginning. First, African governments must be persuaded to move away from the thinking that increased access to higher education, in itself is a great achievement. This thinking has accounted for the public universities’ inability to stick to the acceptable norms on student/staff ratios, for instance, and why regulatory bodies’ initiatives in that regard, are almost always defeated.

Secondly, the study brings out the need for accrediting bodies to intensify their activities, especially by encouraging universities to establish self-regulatory mechanisms instead of relying on other competing institutions for quality assurance. The regulatory body could then concentrate on setting, and monitoring compliance with appropriate benchmarks designed to ensure quality development in the universities.

Finally, the quality monitoring systems of the regulatory agencies must involve all relevant stakeholders, not least of which are the students, who are expected to be the major beneficiaries of any such effective quality systems.

On the part of the universities, it is important for them to constantly wake up to the fact that the term, ‘quality’ has become and will continue to be a major factor in the provision of higher education. The term will continue to feature prominently in the attraction and, or competition for students, high calibre human and other resources for the running of the academic and research enterprises. Having come up to that realisation, they should constantly take stock of their activities and the resources available to them and concentrate on the provision of higher education where their resources would give them the most competitive advantage. Experimenting with the provision of programmes before doing the
requisite market survey and taking stock of the resources available to them would almost likely lead to one end – failure.

Secondly, African higher education institutions, especially the private ones must learn to cooperate among themselves in areas such as provision of graduate studies, to train the requisite human resources to teach and run their institutions. Unbridled competition for the same limited resources will only lead to the collapse of some of them instead of ensuring quality provision.

Finally, the universities must not only establish and strengthen their internal quality assurance systems but also cooperate with the regulatory bodies to improve their overall provision and international recognition.