Chapter 3

The concept of accreditation, in relation to quality and quality assurance

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to create a conceptual understanding of accreditation and its role in higher education. Before then, we attempt to set the stage by seeing accreditation as a specific form of evaluation. The object of the evaluation is quality of higher education; so we will treat that concept in some depth. Thence, we move to quality assurance, and its attributes, in higher education institutions, as a general way to link quality to evaluation. Quality assurance in higher education comes to education institutions in two main types - external and internal quality assurance – and, as I will explain in due course, one of the forms of external quality assurance is accreditation.

This chapter will first, provide a clear distinction in terms of definitions and functions of the concepts as provided in the literature. Although, as we shall see presently, different definitions have been assigned in the literature to these concepts, especially in higher education, there are links established between them and these links need to be demonstrated to have a better appreciation of how each of them influences the other. Thus, this chapter seeks to do that. Finally, as the main objective of this study is to assess the impact the accrediting system had made on the quality development of universities and their programmes in Ghana, it is important to come out with an operational definition that links the two concepts – accreditation and quality – together, especially in the environment where the study was conducted. In Ghana, accreditation is scarcely differentiated from quality and its assurance in higher education. This appears to be so as the same agency oversees the implementation of the two concepts in higher education in the country. Indeed, one would hardly hear any discussion on the quality of higher education in Ghana without the name of the accrediting agency being mentioned. Defining and discussing the concepts in this chapter, are therefore intended to provide the
appropriate background and operational definitions in subsequent references in the thesis.

3.2 Evaluation

Before an attempt is made to define the concept of accreditation, it will be important to understand that of evaluation, as the processes culminating in the grant of accreditation are associated with the evaluation of various factors, e.g. staffing and physical facilities. Vlasceanu et al. (2007, p.56) define evaluation as, ‘the general process of a systematic and critical analysis leading to judgements and, or recommendations regarding the quality of a higher education institution or a programme’. The procedures associated with an evaluation can be carried out either internally or externally. In the latter case, the object of evaluation may be an institution, a particular unit of an institution, or a core activity of an institution, but the evaluator must be located outside of the object of evaluation (Vlasceanu et al., 2007). In the more formal or systematic forms of evaluation, a report is compiled at the end of the evaluation. In a formative evaluation, the report has a view to improving the quality of operations of the institution and, or its core activities. A summative evaluation, on the other hand, is aimed at arriving at a statement summarising the performance of the institution or programme (Stakes, 2009). An evaluation process may have both formative and summative purposes simultaneously. Although in most accreditation schemes both formative and summative evaluations are aimed at, in the end, accreditation’s ‘yes/no’ decision to higher education institutions, is eminently summative.

Internal Evaluation or Self-Evaluation is either conducted by the institution itself or consultants appointed by the institution and consists of activities such as the systematic collection of administrative data, questioning of students and graduates and the holding of moderated interviews with lecturers and students (Vlasceanu et al., 2007). A self-study report is compiled out of this and this report is aimed at quality enhancement, institutional effectiveness, and or competitiveness and may provide information for an external evaluation team or agency such as that for accreditation. It must be emphasised however, that evaluation is not the same as accreditation (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Decisions on the grant of accreditation are usually based on previously published criteria, and as agreed on with the higher education sector.
3.3 The Concept of Quality in Higher Education

The concept of quality assumed prominence from the 1980s through the 1990s to the present and features in the description of almost every facet of life – quality of life, quality of products, quality of human resources and quality of service. Indeed, the concept has become all-pervasive in almost every sphere of human endeavour, not the least in organizations and the products coming out of them. Interest in the concept intensified with the perceived competitive advantage by Japanese firms over their European and American counterparts in the 1980s and 1990s (Hall, 1996).

In higher education, the concept of quality attracted tremendous interest across the globe in the period beginning from the early 1980s. Three main factors accounted for this upsurge. First, were the rapid increase in student numbers and the accompanying increase in the number of fields of study, departments and institutions (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). These developments raised questions about the amount and direction of public expenditure on higher education. While stakeholders in the larger society demanded some basic quality in the face of the increased enrolments, providers of resources, both public and private, demanded accountability and ‘value for money’ in the utilization of such resources from the institutions. Second, but related to the first factor was the inability of governments to accommodate the extra budget arising out of the expansion of student numbers and institutions. Stakeholders often raised questions about the relative quality of processes and products in higher education when budgets seemed to be overstretched. Finally, the transition process to knowledge economies generated interest in quality issues in many countries, particularly with regard to policies to guide student demand to fields perceived to be important for further economic development (Neave, 1986).

Other factors led to the remarkable trend towards attention to quality and its improvement in higher education. The factors that manifested themselves especially in Europe during the last decade included government policies stressing on decentralization, the growing trend of internationalization of students and studies that gave priority to international comparison of well-defined levels of quality (Thune, 1998).
Parallel developments that have also influenced this trend include the move in higher education from elite to a mass-system, which has consequently changed the nature of the student population. This development, in turn, produced the need for quality in higher education that may meet the diverse students’ needs and abilities.

The foregoing appears to suggest that some definition of quality would be the cure to address the identified issues that had arisen in the new dynamics of higher education. The diverse students’ needs, however, coupled with the expectations of other stakeholders, such as employers; seem to have rather added to the confusion in providing an acceptable definition for the concept of quality. For now, Harvey & Green’s (1993) five classifications of quality in higher education, often cited in discourses on quality in higher education, are utilized as bases for discussion of the concept. This is because their classifications do not only look at attributions of quality in higher education but also interested parties – who may be referred to as stakeholders – likely to support each classification. They also identify the expected outcomes of each classification.

3.3.1 Quality as exceptional or as excellence

The traditional notion of quality here implies exclusivity, distinctiveness, elitist or very special and inaccessible to most. In the realm of education, it would be hard to attain this notion of excellence or ‘high quality’ as it does not lend itself to assessment against any definable criteria. Reputation constitutes the main basis for its assurance.

This approach to quality places emphasis on the maintenance of some high level academic standards, that are not easy to attain, but must be surpassed before quality can be said to have been achieved. Quality would be adjudged through the summative assessment of knowledge and implies the presumption of a normative ‘gold standard’ for both learning and research (Harvey, 1999). ‘Privileged’ internal stakeholders – academics, for instance – are more likely to support this approach.

Certainly, this classification of quality, although may be found in the vision statements of many higher education institutions for whatever reason, not excluding marketing purposes, would appear too utopian to be measured for purposes of impact by an accrediting body.
3.3.2 Quality as perfection or consistency

The approach here sees the quality output as flawless with zero defects and consistent. This involves a shift from outcome standards measurement to process standards, with focus on reliability. The emphasis is on consistency in external quality monitoring of academic competence and on external standards, which form the core task of quality assurance agencies including accrediting bodies (Harvey, 2007).

3.3.3 Quality as fitness for purpose

Quality is fit for purpose when it equates with the fulfilment of a specification or stated outcomes (Harvey, 2007). The approach relates standards to specified purpose-related objectives and, in theory requires criteria-referenced assessment of students (Harvey, 1999). Although the concept appears to be straightforward, issues have been raised about the assessment of ‘fitness’ and whose purpose quality is to serve (Moodie, 1986). In higher education, however, the expectation is that fitness for purpose will be operationalized at the academic level where departments articulate the specifications of particular programmes, their aims and expected learning outcomes to enable prospective students and employers determine whether or not their needs and requirements are likely to be met (Harvey, 2007).

3.3.4 Quality as value for money

An institution provides value for money – and hence attains quality status – if it satisfies the demands of public accountability and provides, for example, more graduates for fewer public resources (Harvey & Green 1993). Like all organizations, sponsors of higher education institutions – whether in the form of budgetary support or student fees - expect accountability from the operators. Stakeholders – parents, governments, society, employers, etc. - expect universities to provide quality education without squandering money. The standards for quality place emphasis on providing the customer with a ‘good deal’ and maintaining or improving academic standards for both education and research output while keeping the resource input for this achievement at the same level or less, per unit cost. This view almost equates quality with efficiency.
3.3.5 Quality as transformation

Education involves cognitive transcendence with the provider ‘doing something to the customer’ rather than just ‘doing something for the customer’. University education thus transforms students’ perception of the world. This transformation also affects the university teacher’s perception of their role as well as the culture of the institution itself (Biggs, 2001; p 221-238). Maintenance of academic standards, under quality as transformation, is by the assessment of students’ acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills – analysis, critique, synthesis and innovation – against explicit objectives. The focus is on adding value rather than gold standards. The inclusion of empowerment as part of transformation requires both formative and summative assessments. Accrediting agencies routinely assess the institutions they accredit using the quality as transformation measures as part of their criteria when they ask explicitly or implicitly, what it is that students have learned, and whether that learning involves not only applying skills, but includes higher-order capabilities and attitudes (analysis, critique, synthesis and innovation).

The foregoing discussion of the quality concept – which is by no means exhaustive – shows that there are several conceptual approaches regarding views held on the question of quality specific to higher education.

The concept of quality has become a very contentious but enduring development in the operations of higher education institutions although expectations arising out of it are as diverse as the stakeholders considering it are. What seems to be certain, however, is that no higher education institution can afford not to pay attention to the concept and the various expectations arising out of it. Institutions that fail to accord the concept the needed attention may not be able to survive regulatory challenges, coming out of accrediting agencies for instance, and in attracting students and resources to survive in a very competitive environment.

In Ghana, and indeed many other African countries, the concept of quality has become all the more important due to the dynamics of the changing landscape of the provision of higher education – many of such factors had been recounted in the previous chapter of this thesis. For instance, tremendous increase in demand for higher education and government’s inability to provide resources to existing state-owned
institutions to meet such demand has necessitated the liberalization of
provision to include private investors. During the period of colonial
rule, only a few African citizens, mainly businesspersons and cash crop
farmers, could sponsor their wards to study in higher education
institutions, which were located in the metropolitan countries. On the
attainment of independence, only a few of such institutions had been
replicated in these countries but the demand for skilled human resources
to take over the reins of government was immense. The resources left
by the colonial masters were therefore utilized to establish many
second-cycle and a few additional higher education institutions. Undue
populism by civilian governments and consequent interruption by
military regimes resulted in lack of proper planning to address the
human resource requirements in such African countries, including
Ghana. The need to create access for the increased youthful population
who could not find places in the already overcrowded existing state-
sponsored higher education institutions led African governments to
make room for private providers. African states, however, had to
establish regulatory bodies – such as the National Accreditation Board
of Ghana – first to prevent rogue providers, whose sole aim was to make
money, and to ensure that both state and private providers did not go
below agreed minimum levels of quality provision. These regulatory
bodies have been given additional responsibilities to ensure that quality
does not remain at minimum levels only but must grow, as the
institutions mature, taking into consideration current developments
worldwide, as well as addressing the developmental needs of the
individual countries.

Looking at Harvey and Green’s five-point classification of quality
in relation to African higher education institutions and their regulatory
bodies’ perception of quality, it is obvious that although one may find
such lofty sentences in an institution’s vision statement, it remains just
that - quality as perfection or excellence. No African country, at least
on the face of it, wants to implement policies that will create elitism,
implied in that first definition of quality. None may even have the sort
of resources that will ensure that kind of quality, if it even exists
anywhere.

With regard to Harvey & Green’s second classification of quality as
that of perfection and consistency, African quality assurance agencies
recognize that as desirable but the reality on the scene is that limited –
human and physical – resources exist to ensure that. Measures these agencies therefore adopt, in order not to fall below what is generally acceptable, for instance by professional organizations to which they belong, is to set minimum standards for some core indicators for newly established institutions. While these institutions, at their inception, are not permitted to fall below the set standards failure of which would attract specified sanctions, they are also expected to progressively improve beyond the minimum requirements as they grow failure of which may result in the non-renewal of their accreditation to operate.

Harvey & Green’s classification of quality as fitness for purpose in higher education is enforced by African accrediting bodies, which require that higher education institutions state the aims and objectives, as well as the desired outcomes of their study programmes. These are routinely checked and their implementation monitored through periodic assessments and auditing exercises.

Ghanaian, and for that matter many African quality assurance agencies in higher education, have included ‘value for money’ as a criterion for evaluating quality in their institutions. Among others, they ensure that the institutions employ qualified accounting personnel to keep their books and subject such books to periodic auditing by independent and certified agencies. An agreed criterion has also been set with regard to the disbursement of budgetary funds for key sectors on the institutions such as academic departments, library resources, laboratories and workshops, etc. These are all geared towards ensuring that students obtain value for money in their quest to acquire knowledge.

Three main factors have made quality as transformation an important concept in the provision of higher education in African countries. First, the objective of higher education has moved from training personnel for government employment, which used to be the case at the immediate post-colonial era and during the era of the cold war when many African countries tilted towards the socialist ideology. Thus, higher education is now expected to transform the perception of graduates from the thinking that they would walk into ready-made government employment into that of creating their own jobs as entrepreneurs.

Second, many African governments have come to the realization, although belatedly, that unless they moved away from being producers and exporters of primary commodities their economies would remain
underdeveloped. With the examples of the ‘Asian Tigers’, who attained political independence around the same period, in mind, African governments are now realizing the importance and relevance of providing higher education as a catalyst for this transformation agenda for development.

Finally, Ghana and many African countries, have realized that the discovery of new natural resources, for example crude oil, would have very little impact on their countries’ development without local expertise to handle their exploitation. Higher education must itself acquire the expertise not only to handle the increasing enrolments but also to impart relevant high-level knowledge, skills and abilities to handle the new realities in Africa’s developmental agenda.

The foregoing obviously imposes new and greater challenges in the provision of transformational quality in higher education, to address the development agenda in Africa. Thus African quality assurance agencies, in addition to ensuring that the higher education institutions they regulate operate within the minimum quality requirements, also guide the institutions to play an effective role in helping to improve the living standards of the general populace.

3.4 Quality assurance in higher education institutions

Harvey (2007) has drawn a distinction between the processes of quality assurance and the concept of quality. He describes quality as the provider of the conceptual underpinning for quality assurance processes and not a shorthand for those processes.

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (2006, p.34) defines quality assurance, in operational terms as, ‘embracing all the procedures, systems and processes through which the maintenance and strengthening of quality is assured’. It is therefore an umbrella concept covering all activities undertaken to investigate, monitor and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of institutions in the delivery of their mandates.

From the industrial perspective, Barnett (1992, p.117) defines quality assurance as looking to develop, ‘processes so rigorous that imperfections are heavily reduced and ideally eradicated’. As a human process, however, quality assurance in education cannot eliminate error as could be done in an industrial environment. Indeed, commission of errors in the educational setting may be functional especially as it may
provide an opportunity to players, such as academics and students, to learn from the error and improve themselves, as well as the system. What quality assurance does in educational settings therefore, is to provide the platform for the intended and planned activities to assure quality (Segers & Dochy, 1996). The focus on ‘intended and planned activities’ in this definition points to the fact that quality assurance cannot be a haphazard, one-off activity but a continuous process geared towards operationalizing the concept as a way of life in an institution. In general, quality assurance includes maintaining and improving quality (Ursin & Huusko, 2006). To external stakeholders, such as parents and employers, quality assurance in higher education attempts to provide a reasonable guarantee that institutions, the courses they offer and their graduates meet certain required standards. There are also systems in place to ensure continuous improvement in quality and to assure stakeholders of continual efforts to meet their expectations both in quality provision and in accountability.

In order for higher education institutions to work on the quality of their education, quality assurance has become a topical issue in their systems, first in the western countries and now almost throughout the world.

In Europe, the United Kingdom introduced formal quality assurance schemes at the end of the twentieth century with a declaration of the concept as the most important feature in British higher education. Following closely on their heels were France and The Netherlands (Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens, 2006).

As had been stated elsewhere in this review, the Ghanaian accreditation agency, just like many others from Africa and elsewhere, double as the quality assurance agency for higher education institutions. What this means is that institutions that want to maintain their accreditation statuses with the agency must comply and conform to the set norms (standards) of the agency at all times or risk revocation of that status. Maintaining those minimum levels of quality will however, not be enough for such institutions to be granted autonomy (charter) to award their own qualifications – degree certificates, etc. – to students graduating from such institutions. Institutions desiring autonomy will have to demonstrate quality improvement by, among others, employing academic staff of a certain pedigree in terms of qualifications, teaching and research experience. That appears to be the Ghanaian accrediting
body’s way of combining the functions of assuring both quality maintenance and quality improvement.

Added to the difficulty associated with definition of the concept is the assessment methods to be adopted in adjudging issues of quality. According to van Vught & Westerheijden (2012), higher education may be classified, in economic terms, as an experience good or even a credence good. They explain an experience good as one whose quality can only be judged after consumption, in contrast to the textbook case of ‘search goods’ whose quality can be judged in advance by consumers. In the case of credence goods, consumers are unable to judge their quality even after consumption – standard examples being, doctors’ consults, computer repairs and education (Bonroy & Constantatos, 2008; Dulleck & Kerschbamer, 2006). The explanation given is that students, at the initial stages of their higher education experience, may not know beforehand how good the teaching would be in enhancing their knowledge, skills and competencies. The argument can be extended to the anticipations of other stakeholders such as companies, governments and the professions. As a consequence, assessing quality of higher education cannot simply be left to the ‘market’ or to stakeholders such as students or employers. Achieving transparency about quality needs the cooperation of the higher education institutions, which solely have inside knowledge about the education they provide. Hence, quality assurance in higher education systems consists of two interrelated processes - internal quality assurance and external quality assurance.

3.5 Internal Quality Assurance

Recalling the definition provided by The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (2006, p.34), quality assurance embraces all the procedures, systems and processes through which the maintenance and strengthening of quality is assured in higher education. Within the higher education institutions, internal quality assurance embraces procedures through which these institutions evaluate their own operations and functions. The underlying principle here is that quality is primarily the responsibility of the higher education institution itself. There is therefore the need for the institution to develop an efficient internal quality assurance system to serve as a kind of self-evaluation (Ursin & Huusko, 2006). Self-evaluation is the critical examination by
the object of evaluation of its own operations with the aim of improving those operations (Saarinen, 1995). Adelman (2005) describes institutional self-evaluation as intrusive; from the point of view of academic teachers and researchers in that, it entails explanation of activities and actions that used to be their professional private realm. The process involves the periodic description, by an institution and its members of their activities and actions with regard to education. There is also a critical evaluation of such activities through which the organization gains views – ideally shared views for the further development of its future education. Thus, self-evaluation creates an arena for communication and knowledge transmission on both the organizational and disciplinary dimensions of higher education. In addition, the assessments done under self-evaluation provides a legitimate way for an open discussion of possible solutions to present problems (Saarinen, 1995).

Saari (2002) adds that the power position of the institution conducting the evaluation, or the group producing it, frames the discourse on self-evaluation. The educational and evaluation policy context also influences the discourse. According to him, the conventional nature of the written outcomes of self-evaluation, results in either their publicly expressed developmental function being unclear or never being put into effect.

Continuing the discourse on quality assurance two, out of four, main purposes identified by Harvey and Newton (2005) for its practice in the higher education setting, are accountability and improvement.

1. **Accountability** - has been the dominant underlying rationale for the introduction of quality assurance and its evaluation in higher education institutions. It is about institutions taking responsibility for the service they provide and the public money they spend. The mixture of functions that is usually performed to ensure accountability during self-evaluation by the institutions includes rendering an account of stewardship and creating platforms for the development of the institution and its structures. Others are, displaying the relationship between institutional self-sufficiency and external evaluations, persuading outsiders to appreciate the good efforts of the institution and demonstrating the excellence of the institution.
While these may be appropriate in tackling the multi-faceted challenges the institution faces in its environment, they may cloud, or even crowd out, the objective of internal quality assurance. Ursin & Huusko (2006) thus, have suggested that while self-evaluations contribute in various ways to university departments’ developmental work, those departments do not find enough time to handle a succession of the evaluation projects. They are, therefore unable to maintain it continuously, as they should, to make it a sustainable venture. In order not to reduce quality assessment into a mere ritualistic game-playing (Newton, 2002), the authors suggest again that when quality assurance systems are introduced, the culture of self-evaluation should be acknowledged to enable it maintain its emancipatory effect. The consequence for not doing that will result in self-evaluation and other quality assurance practices becoming control devices reflecting the worst elements of, what they call ‘academic capitalism’.

2. **Improvement or quality enhancement** - is about the encouragement of adjustment and change. Quality assurance procedures under the improvement function normally encourages institutions to reflect upon their practices with a view to enabling a process of continuous improvement of the learning process and the range of outcomes (Harvey, 2007). This would require a systematised and periodic self-evaluation by the institutions.

Critical factors identified by some authors, that well-established quality assurance systems must be able to address include:

1. The level on which the evaluation process will take place – institutional, departmental or course level?
2. The main goals or functions of the evaluation – validation, accreditation or quality monitoring?
3. A clear description of the institution’s aims and objectives to serve as a reference for the choice of valid indicators.
4. Description of the institution’s/department’s/course’s strengths and weaknesses – it is in this context that quality can be understood - and the development of a plan to enhance quality.
5. Evaluation of the implementation of the proposed plan (Jessee, 1984; Barnett, 1992; Green, 1994; Segers & Dochy, 1996).
Thus, quality assurance must be systematized in a cyclical plan under which conclusions from the factors listed above are used to begin another process of assessments periodically. This procedure will be akin to the Deming Wheel, originally adopted as a model for improvement in industrial production.

The four step PDCA cycle (Fig. 3-1) developed by the Japanese from the Deming wheel was originally meant to be a problem solving measure and it included planning – defining the problem, possible causes and solutions; doing/implementing; checking – evaluating the results and action – back to plan, if results are unsatisfactory or standardization, if results are satisfactory.

![PDCA Cycle](image)

*Figure 3-1 PDCA Cycle*

After a series of modifications, Langley et al. (1996 & 2009) transformed the PDCA cycle into a PDSA cycle to form the basis of a model for improvement that can be applied to the improvement of processes, products and services in any organization (Fig. 3-2).
Note should be taken of the replacement of ‘check’ in the third phase of the cycle with ‘study’, which the authors explain is meant to build new knowledge in that phase. In addition to determining whether a change resulted in an improvement during a particular test, it is also important to build knowledge that will be able to predict whether a change will result in improvement under different future conditions.

Three questions added to the PDSA cycle are not only relevant for the objectives of this study but also for practitioners desiring to use quality assurance to improve quality in higher education institutions. These are:

1. What are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know that a change is an improvement?
3. What changes can we make that will result in an improvement?

The PDSA model for improvement (Fig. 3-3), as had been alluded to, was originally designed for the improvement of quality of products coming out of industry.
Langley et al (1996 & 2009) have stated that the model can be applied to improve services, presumably like the quality of provision in higher education institutions. Although there seems to be little consensus among writers on quality assurance as to how precisely this could be achieved there seems to be a broad consensus that some sort of quality improvement or quality enhancement cycle is relevant for higher education.

In Ghana, the accreditation procedure adopts a cyclical review of higher education institutions and the programmes they run. This effort is, not only to ensure the maintenance of minimum standards but also, to ensure that the institutions put in mechanisms to improve the quality of their facilities and provision between the assessment cycles.

In the US, higher education institutions employ internal quality assurance procedures to:
a. provide detailed evidence of how they are carrying out their mission,
b. determine how well they are performing,
c. show mechanisms adopted to assess their own effectiveness, and
d. identify their shortfalls and measures put in place to correct those shortfalls (Graham et al., 1995).

The higher education institutions adopt a number of overlapping processes to ensure internal quality assurance. These include the conduct of programme reviews, institutional assessments, evaluation of all scheduled courses and periodic evaluation of academic staff (faculty) and their achievements.

In the year 2014, UNESCO’s International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) launched an international research project on effective internal quality assurance (IQA) solutions for higher education institutions (cf. Martin, 2016). The studies were conducted in eight public and private universities in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. The institutions sampled indicated that IQA had helped to initiate a large set of reforms, particularly in the domain of teaching and learning there was general improvement in the internal coherence of study programmes as well as their alignment with labour market needs. Additionally, management processes in the cited institutions had been streamlined while evidence-based decisions arrived at by collecting data from internal and external stakeholders had been enhanced. Finally, the study found general support for the IQA system among majority of students and administrators while academic staff were somewhat sceptical of the system seeing it mainly as a management tool. Students supported the system as a tool to enhance their employability through the improvement of the quality of their university education and called for more involvement in discussions to improve the system. To administrators, more human resources was needed to effectively carry out IQA-related tasks while academics highlighted the fact that the benefits of the different processes were not immediately obvious.

It can be deduced from the practice of internal quality assurance in European higher education institutions that the activities involved are normally scheduled to happen in a cyclical format. The evaluations are done either on institution-wide basis or on some aspects of it e.g.
teaching and research. The major aim of internal quality assurance is to evaluate the operations of the institution during the period under review with the view to improving those operations. The exercise is also to expose the institutions to the principles of transparency and accountability to their stakeholders. Perception of what the practice of internal quality assurance is meant to achieve, in the main, determines the extent of support the practice enjoys among the various population groups within an institution. The various authors on the subject have treated it from varying angles. These include evaluation of the total operations of the institution (The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, 2006) and its intrusiveness, especially from the point of view of academics (Adelman, 2005). Others are the power position of the institution or group conducting the evaluations involved in the practice (Saari, 2002) and, accountability and quality improvement (Harvey & Newton, 2005). Whatever the approach adopted, the advice given by Ursin & Huusko (2006) to the effect of having an inbuilt self-evaluation mechanism in quality assessment processes to achieve their emancipatory effect instead of mere ritual games, is worth taking by all practitioners.

In Africa, like in other parts of the world, internal quality assurance measures in higher education institutions include input factors such as screening of candidates for admission, adequacy of qualified staff – in terms of qualifications and experience, availability and adequacy of good facilities for teaching and learning and sustainable funding mechanisms. Internal quality assurance measures also seek to address process factors such as the development and delivery of good quality curriculum, effective teaching methods, adequacy and quality of student assessment methods, student engagement and student satisfaction. Other factors sought to be addressed by internal quality assurance measures are in the areas of output (quantity, efficiency and quality of graduates) and outcomes (employability, employment, citizenship, etc.).

3.6 External quality assurance

External quality assurance refers to assessments undertaken by external agencies with a view to maintaining and, or improving defined levels of quality in higher education institutions. Assessments undertaken by these agencies include:
- Institutional accreditation, where items evaluated include physical facilities, library facilities, governance of the institution and funding.

- Programme accreditation, includes evaluation of teaching/learning quality of staff and research.

- In some jurisdictions, such as the UK and the Netherlands, only research is evaluated.

- In institutional audits, quite often institutional management is evaluated (which might include management of research and of community outreach, but that depends on the higher education institution’s mission.

In this thesis the focus is on the evaluation of certain core indicators which must meet specified quality criteria before higher education institutions are granted accreditation or reaccreditation in Ghana, as will be shown later when that country’s accrediting agency (NAB) is introduced.

Measures to assure quality have existed (and continue to exist) in many African higher education institutions, especially the state-owned ones. These measures had, mainly been bequeathed to these institutions by older institutions in Europe, to which they had been affiliated during colonial rule. With the liberalisation of provision of higher education to include private investors and the consequent establishment of external quality assurance bodies, most of the hitherto internal quality assurance measures have been adopted and formalised for use by these external bodies. The enforcement of the quality measures has also been made mandatory to avoid unilateral adjustments to the specified minimum standards by the institutions, without reference to the external quality assurance agencies.

External agencies assure the quality of higher education institutions and their programmes by, either them or the state, putting in place, supra institutional policies and practices to be followed by the institutions (Dill, 2007). From the cited author’s research, many writers on the subject argue that external quality assurance leans towards an orientation of accountability, summative and judgemental policies in approach and assumes the conception of quality as fitness for purpose and value for money. This assertion also reflects that of opinion leaders,
such as politicians and industry leaders, in Ghana judging from their pronouncements on various public platforms.

In addition to accountability and quality improvement/enhancement, already discussed under internal quality assurance, Harvey and Newton (2005) also identified two other purposes of quality assurance in the higher education setting, which embrace the various facets of the subject. These are control and compliance.

1. **Control** - is about ensuring the integrity of the higher education sector, particularly making it difficult for poor or rogue providers to continue operating and making access to the sector dependent on the fulfilment of adequacy criteria (Harvey, 2007). With the increasing participation of the private sector in higher education, governments seek the protection of the public interest mainly through external quality assurance agencies by, among others, applying controls such as quality monitoring and accreditation. The implementation of control measures, such as external reviews, is to prevent the flouting, eroding and undermining of basic standards acceptable in the provision of university-level education and research. The control aspect of quality evaluation also ensures the non-compromising of national and international comparability of standards in student academic and professional achievement.

It may be acknowledged that this measure might not have informed the introduction of the system of external quality monitoring in places such as Europe. Various writers, however, have pointed to the potential danger of lowering standards to attract many more students if funders introduce or insist on providing funding based on student or graduate numbers (Boer, Jongbloed, Benneworth, Cremonini, Kolster, Kottmann & Vossensteyn, 2015).

2. **Compliance** - ensures that institutions adopt procedures, practices and policies that funding agencies and governments consider desirable for the proper conduct of the sector. Beyond financial accountability, governments place increasing emphasis on securing specified outputs and outcomes from publicly funded activities. This is in response to citizens’ expectations about improving service quality and policy effectiveness (PA Consulting, 2000). Other stakeholders such as professional and regulatory bodies seek compliance through quality monitoring and the enforcement of policies on acceptable standards. Accreditation had been the preferred mode of checking this and had
usually focused on inputs such as facilities, curricula and staffing (Harvey, 2007). Lately, however, the focus of accreditation in this respect has been broadened to include factors such as institutional effectiveness and outcomes such as graduate employability thereby enhancing the compliance function of the external quality assurance agencies.

Some authors on the subject and practitioners in the field are however, sceptical about the ability of external quality agencies such as accrediting bodies, to enforce or enhance quality in higher education institutions. Westerheijden (2013) for instance has listed a number of reasons why quality assurance does not enhance quality. Three of these reasons are discussed below:

To him, many quality assurance schemes are designed mainly for purposes of accountability and accreditation and mostly focus on maintaining standards and achieving externally determined indicators. In the quest to satisfy the measurable ‘conditionalities’ and thus achieve accreditation status, efforts are concentrated on the indicators to the detriment of experimenting with innovations that may have led to quality enhancement. In Ghana, private providers of higher education appear to be the main ‘victims’ of the circumstances stated by Westerheijden, as they have to contend with two sets of externally-determined ‘conditionalities’ – first from their mentors (who may also be their competitors) and the accreditation agency – in order to commence and or legally continue to operate in the country. This, of course leaves them with little time and resources to think about innovation. Indeed, in many cases, the mentoring institutions, which are required to award their degree certificates to graduands from the private institutions, would not countenance any major deviations from their methods of provision by the latter institutions. Bringing the problems faced by some private providers to the fore however, does not remove the threat posed by some (potential) rogue providers, including faith-based ones in many African countries. Although the extreme cases cited in Africa may not be prevalent in Europe or other western countries, one wonders whether measures designed to ensure accountability and control in higher education are not seen as quality initiatives by beneficiaries and clients of those institutions such as students and parents. Could it be that academics would want to control and demand accountability from everyone else but themselves? Are there any
findings showing that the institution of quality measures by the quality assurance schemes had actually led to deterioration, rather than improvement of the institutions? Alternatively, this further compounds the definition of quality.

The second argument advanced by Westerheijden (2013) as a reason why quality assurance does not enhance quality seems to suggest that governments hide behind such schemes to advance their real agenda of control and budget cuts to the institutions. He cites, for instance, the role played by the New Public Management (NPM) policy in making quality assessments popular instruments ostensibly to deliver better services to citizens. The NPM’s actual emphasis has however, been the development of new forms of control which had not been conducive to experimenting with innovative, and possibly, better forms of education. While this argument appears plausible, it would seem that governments, while on the face of it, appear to be using quality assurance schemes and agencies to prosecute their hidden agenda, rather undermine the genuine intentions of the schemes and thereby undermine their credibility. If quality assurance schemes are unable to achieve the objective of enhancing quality, then the real cause in this regard should be traced to governments’ schemes and not those of external quality assurance.

The third argument seems to suggest that quality assurance schemes have adopted terms such as globalisation, internationalisation, or reputation enhanced by the rankings as quality indicators while the real purpose of these schemes is to attract international students mainly as a source of income generation. In the European higher education area, under the Bologna Process, for instance, achievement of accreditation is seen as attainment of the goal of quality instead of putting in place real quality enhancement schemes to attain international competitiveness (Westerheijden, 2013).

While acknowledging that criticisms laid against the objectives, real or perceived, may not be out of place, further research may have to be conducted to determine issues such as the relationship between the objectives of quality assurance schemes and those designed to achieve quality enhancement. There may also be the need to determine from such research whether there is a need to have ‘referees’ – such as external quality assurance agencies - to regulate and determine the
quality status of higher education institutions or that should be left to
the institutions themselves.

3.7 Link between internal and external quality assurance

Although new developments in the higher education have led to the
introduction of external quality assurance schemes, there can be no
denying the fact that internal schemes in one form or the other had
always existed in these institutions before then. Some of the objectives
internal quality assurance schemes seek to achieve have already been
recounted in an earlier section of this chapter. Developments that have
led to the introduction of external quality assurance schemes despite the
existence of internal schemes include, ‘the massification and
diversification of higher education and widespread reductions in the
levels of funding to support it’ (Brennan & Shah, 2000; p.332). These
developments called for new forms of accountability that placed more
emphasis on assessment and improvement rather than regulation and
control. The distinction between internal and external quality assurance
schemes becomes apparent from the scheme that makes the ultimate
decision. Reichert & Tauch (2003) indicate that internal quality
assurance schemes form part of preparation of an institution for external
quality monitoring. While a similar assertion had been made earlier on
by Brennan & Shah (2000, p.336), the latter were quick to add that there
were many examples also of external assessment contributing to an
internally led process. They cited examples of situations where internal
reviews, however might have no connections with external evaluation.
These include situations where an institution might decide to conduct
surveys of student opinions, of performance and progression data and
of views of employers. According to them, self-evaluations or internal
reviews now feature commonly in many higher education institutions
albeit, with significant variations. The dominant feature, however, lies
in peer review as an assessment mechanism for research although this
is also increasingly being applied to the assessment of education. The
authors note that substantial differences however, remain in who is
regarded as a peer for assessment purposes. In Ghana and for that matter
many African countries, assessment of new institutions and their
programmes is done by experienced senior lecturers and professors
from the older institutions. Although the exercise is touted as that of
peer review, the fact that the academics in the new institutions are
mainly fresh from school, and the evaluators had taught many of them, not quite long ago, hardly make the exercise look like one of peer review.

Reichert & Tauch (2003) again cite research results indicating that internal quality assurance procedures are just as widespread as external ones. This, however, is not the case in many African countries as formal internal quality assurance schemes are now taking root in many African universities with training being facilitated with external assistance from bodies such as the German DAAD.

In the cited research results by Reichert & Tauch, 82% of European heads of higher education institutions reported having internal procedures to monitor the quality of teaching while 53% had internal procedures to monitor the quality of research. A quarter of the higher education institutions addressed other aspects than teaching and research. They however, did not find the internal procedures developed robust enough as to make external quality assurance superfluous.

### 3.8 Accreditation

The historical antecedent of accreditation dates back to the 19th century in the United States essentially as a means to clarify the boundaries and roles of colleges and universities by professionals from both categories of institutions, who were also concerned about student mobility and transfer of credit (Eaton, 2016). Accreditation has since emerged as a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and or, higher education programmes for quality assurance and quality improvement. This definition reinforces the earlier introduction of the concept of quality as an objective of accreditation that must not only be maintained at a certain defined threshold, but also improved as well.

In a more specific definition, Harvey (2003, p.5) sees accreditation as ‘the establishment or re-statement of the status, legitimacy or appropriateness of an institution, programme (composite of modules) or module of study’. His definition shows that the process of accreditation may cover programmes of the institution as well as the institution itself.

The key principle underlying accreditation is that it is a status acquired by higher education institutions after undergoing a process of evaluation based on known criteria or standards and may be conferred
on institutions or programmes, or both, after they had met the set criteria or standards. They are then referred to as accredited institutions or programmes. The status conferred on an accredited institution or programme thus informs all stakeholders and the public that such an institution and or programme is legitimate and appropriate.

Programme accreditation in higher education may focus on inputs such as staffing and curriculum content; process such as teaching and student support; and outputs such as graduate abilities and employability.

In the case of institutional accreditation, the focus is on overall infrastructure such as classroom and office space, library resources and the general ambiance of the teaching and learning environment. Other factors normally taken into consideration during the institutional accreditation evaluation process include financial sustainability and the governance structure of the institution. In short, institutional accreditation effectively provides (an institution) the licence to operate based on an estimation of its potential to produce graduates that meet explicit or implicit academic standards or professional competence (Harvey, 2003).

The foregoing characterisations of institutional accreditation is mainly true of developing countries, such as Ghana, where liberalisation of provision of higher education to accommodate increasing enrolments is a recent phenomenon. The state-owned universities enjoy guaranteed demand by students, due to their relatively cheaper fees, and de jure accreditation as they were set up by legislation as well as precede the establishment of many African Quality Assurance agencies. Most of them, by virtue of these facts, ‘are likely to allow trade-offs in quality to accommodate the social demand for access and to offset the effects of reduced funding from governments instead of confronting the challenge of searching for alternative solutions’ (Materu, p.31). In the US, the focus of institutional accreditation, under some form of pressure, is gradually shifting from input factors such as faculty credentials and library holdings to institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Similarly, in Europe, the discussion on accreditation is focussing more on the strengthening of internal quality management systems in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, U.K. and the Scandinavian states. (Westerheijden & van der Wende, 2001; Harvey, 2004).
The foregoing definitions imply the existence of a binary distinction between the status of an accredited institution and or programme and that of an unaccredited institution and or programme after an evaluation process. Harvey (2003), however, postulates that this implied sharp distinction or binary state is blurred or softened by what he calls a ‘holding’ decision that permits, in effect, progression to accreditation. This decision ranges from ‘accreditation subject to further action’, through ‘probationary accreditation’ to ‘permission to reapply for accreditation’. Thus, depending on the gravity of the deficiencies identified by an evaluation team, an institution and, or its programmes may be granted a status short of full, usually for periods shorter than the standard period of full accreditation. This is intended to enable the institution to correct deficiencies found during the initial evaluation process. Depending on the previous status of the evaluated institution and on the precise terms of the regulations, the ‘holding decision’ may mean one of several things. For instance, it may mean that a new institution may begin operations on a temporary basis – or may not begin until the deficiencies have been remedied. For an existing and previously accredited institution, it may mean that education operations continue as normal, or that enrolment of new students stop temporarily. If during a second, or usually shorter and more targeted evaluation process, the accreditation agency finds that the deficiencies have indeed been corrected, full accreditation is awarded. However, accreditation may be denied permanently if the corrective measures are not taken or fail to meet the expectation of the accrediting agency within the specified period.

This leads to some definitions of accreditation that include the periodicity of the process. Sursock (2001, p.8) for instance, defines accreditation as, ‘a formal, published statement regarding the quality of an institution or a programme, following a cyclical evaluation based on agreed standards’. The stress on the periodicity of the practice of an accreditation process, however depends on the country and its regulations. In Norway, for instance, there is a once-and-for-all ‘accreditation’ to decide if a college may upgrade to become a university. However, according to Sursock, this cannot be classified as accreditation as it is not cyclical. But the Norwegian government classifies the process as accreditation and has enacted a law to that effect.
Finally, accreditation may be classified as official or private (Hamalainen et al., 2004). Official accreditation is granted for the operation of higher education institutions that meet the criteria by governmental or delegated statutory agencies. This type of accreditation is distinctively non-American and, leads to formal approval decisions. Private accreditation, on the other hand, is in principle, voluntary in nature and not directly linked to the authorities. Private accreditation, a distinctively American concept, is granted by private/voluntary bodies, but over the decades has been given an increasing array of official consequences. It is important to clarify, for instance, that US accreditation can be said to be voluntary only to the extent that a higher education institution may operate without accreditation. However, unaccredited institutions and their students may not be granted state sponsored research grants and financial assistance respectively (Eaton, 2016). Accordingly, in fact every serious higher education institution in the USA needs accreditation even if such accreditation is officially classified as private and voluntary.

Still on the subject of accreditation, it is worthy of note that some authorities on the subject have stated that accreditation and quality enhancement sometimes do not go together (Westerheijden, 2013). Again, although it is said that there are both formative and summative purposes to an accreditation scheme, only the summative goals get attention (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010; Harvey (2006). The assertions by the cited authorities have thus led some to conclude that it appears the dimension of quality is a secondary objective that is gradually being added to the original purpose of accreditation. Whether institutions will be able to strive for quality, howsoever it is defined, while maintaining their accreditation status is one of the objectives that will be explored by this study.

In relation to the Ghanaian scene, it must be restated that accreditation as understood in the country goes beyond the conventional definition of meeting minimum standards to attain or retain that status. That definition may be relevant and apply only to newly established institutions and their programmes during their initial assessments for accreditation. In subsequent cycles of assessments, the procedure expects institutions to grow beyond minimum standards if they are to attain full autonomy status (i.e. with respect to institutions being
mentored by chartered institutions) or retain the accreditation status of their programmes – with respect to all institutions. Institutions adjudged to have made positive moves to improve on specified indicators, such as staffing and student/staff ratios, are therefore seen as improving on their quality.

Thus, the initial mission of the Ghanaian accreditation procedure, is to establish whether an institution meets the minimum standards during an initial assessment exercise. This is in response to the first question in the above model for improvement. The second question – how to know if any change constitutes an improvement – will be addressed if in a subsequent assessment cycle, an institution experiences positive changes in the specified indicators. These may include improvement in academic staffing – in terms of numbers, academic qualifications, research and publications and positive student evaluations, etc. In answering the third question – changes to be made that will likely result in improvement – the accreditation procedure in Ghana relies on suggestions for improvement made by evaluators, both from the country and abroad, and which had been debated and accepted by members of the Board as well as student examination outcomes.

3.9 Summary

In this chapter, efforts have been made to create a comprehensive understanding of what accreditation means in higher education and how it is related to each of the more general concepts of evaluation, quality and quality assurance, and their attributes, as they operate in higher education institutions. It has been noted that many definitions of what constitutes quality exist depending on the authors writing about the concept. Harvey & Green’s (1993) classical definitions and classifications of the concept have however, seen a lot of mention in the higher education quality literature. This was therefore, appropriately reviewed in this chapter and some relations drawn with the accreditation concept.

The related concept of quality assurance was also reviewed in the chapter drawing a distinction between internal and external quality assurance and the objectives they seek to achieve in higher education. The PDSA cycle that had evolved from the Deming Wheel in Japanese business circles and which had now culminated into a Model for Improvement, that can be utilised both in businesses and services was
suggested as possible steps to use for quality assurance in higher education. This allowed us to understand better, the role accreditation plays in higher education quality assurance; it is engaged, therefore in assuring maintenance of minimum standards of quality and in quality enhancement.