Impact of accreditation on quality assurance
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Chapter 4
Theoretical perspectives

4.1 Theoretical underpinnings of study

The main focus of this study is to assess the impact accreditation has had on higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ghana and which compelling environmental factors had influenced the institutions to comply with the tenets of accreditation. With no established accreditation theory prevailing at the moment, the study sought to borrow theoretical frameworks from the social sciences which have relevance for the topic under study.

4.1.1 Neo-institutionalism

One such framework is Di Maggio & Powell’s 1983 work on New Institutionalism. Old Institutionalism, championed by diverse economists such as Veblen, Mitchell and Commons dates back to the early 20th century and focused mainly on evolutionary process and the role institutions played in shaping economic behaviour (cf: Rutherford, 1995). Neo-institutionalism, however, stresses on the legitimacy and symbolic compliance to social norms rather than competition in purely economic terms. The theory will be utilised to explain how institutions, generally, strive to achieve and maintain legitimacy in their environments in the face of competition for limited resources. We will see how in that pursuit, institutions learn from the experiences and adopt practices of others they perceive to be more successful, to enhance their own competitive edge. It may also be, possibly, discovered that such institutions dwell so much on the pursuit of legitimacy without linking it to what ‘really’ works in competition. Scott, in Powell & DiMaggio (1991), stresses that adapting to social norms (compliance) may be the motivation, rather than actual competition in terms of economic efficiency. This may make compliance to accreditation standards symbolic – hence the problems of ‘window dressing’ by higher education institutions rather than wholeheartedly embarking on quality improvement journeys.

Be that as it may, such institutions, and those they seek to learn from, become more and more alike or isomorphic. While the theory’s
original objective is not to explain why institutions adopt measures to improve or enhance their quality, this study borrows it to attempt to explain why, and the extent to which, various higher education institutions in Ghana comply with prescribed measures by the country’s accrediting agency meant for that purpose. It would be realised that, in their quest to achieve and maintain legitimacy and enhance their image before various audiences in and outside Ghana, both public and private universities are exposed to various degrees of isomorphic pressures including one that makes them strive to comply with the accrediting body’s quality prescriptions.

The resource dependency theory will also be examined in an attempt to provide additional explanation as to why, compliance with legislation aside, universities in Ghana, public and private, strive to acquire accreditation. This theory is chosen as an alternative to the purely rationalistic competition with utility maximisation at its core, and as an alternative that works better, probably, in organisations that are operating in a regulated environment rather than in an open market, such as higher education institutions (especially the public ones).

It will be seen that accreditation is sought by institutions and the programmes they run, to enable them have regular access to resources, including human resources such as academic staff and students. This, they (the institutions – public and private) will do by complying with the accrediting body’s prescribed quality measures.

The basis for the study is rooted in the fact that universities, like other organizations, will adopt and go by measures that will ensure, not only their survival in an environment where competition – for good students and academic staff - is very rife, but also enhance their legitimacy and relevance. The competition, in this context may be differentiated from the economist’s understanding of that aimed at profit maximization. Such measures will include adopting practices like accreditation and quality assurance that will aid the attraction of resources, both human and physical, from the affected institutions’ respective environments. They will also adopt practices of similar organizations they adjudge to be more successful in the quest for legitimation in other geographical jurisdictions.

Before delving into the two theories and their relevance to the study, this chapter will look at the concept of New Managerialism that apparently underpins the introduction of practices like accreditation (in
Ghana and perhaps in other African countries) and quality assurance in the discourse of the political process. For instance, could it be that the concepts of accreditation and quality assurance had been introduced mainly or partially because governments had been unable to meet their political goals of providing resources to meet social demands such as addressing increasing enrolments in the universities? Could this latter reason be the cause, or one of the causes, for the privatisation of hitherto public services, such as provision of higher education that had consequently led to the introduction of regulatory mechanisms such as accreditation?

4.1.2 The Concept of New Managerialism

The concept of New Managerialism or New Public Management emerged out of the welfare state reforms, especially in the USA and the UK, in the 1980s. It involved new forms of welfare organizing giving an enhanced role for management (Burden, 1998; Clarke & Newman, 1997). The concept largely advocated the introduction of private sector techniques to public sector management in the name of effectiveness and efficiency. Achieving social progress, under New Managerialism, lies in the continual increases in productivity. Public sector managers, just like their private sector counterparts, have the freedom to plan, implement and measure resources in any way they feel appropriate (Bottery, 2000). This business-like approach replaces management principles based on bureaucratic professionalism.

Applying the concept to higher education, New Managerialism is grounded in an ideological, cultural and political critique of existing institutional structures and organizational forms within higher education institutions. These forms articulate endemic lack of external accountability, internal managerial discipline and routine operational efficiency (Ackroyd, Hughes & Soothill, 1989). As a meta-narrative of social and organizational transformation, New Managerialism can be contextualized within an ideology of market-based Managerialism ‘that would be mobilized right across the public sector of an institutional logic that would simultaneously break the power of professional “producer cartels”’ (Ackroyd et al., 1989; Exworthy & Halford, 1999). Two issues (out of four) identified by Reed (2002) for potential impact of new managerialist philosophy and practice on higher education are of relevance to this study. These are:
1. The direct and indirect regulation of the professional academic labour process and practice through the design, implementation and monitoring of various control mechanisms geared to the detailed and relatively intrusive auditing and continuing evaluation of professional academic work in relation to various, externally-determined, performance measures; and

2. The redefinition and legitimating of higher education as a commodity - providing service in which education needs and priorities are reduced to modifiable and measurable performance outcomes and indicators that become institutionalised benchmarks against which individual institutional operations and outcomes can be assessed and continually re-assessed.

In sum, the doctrine of New Managerialism demands the opening up of higher education institutions, like all organizations, for monitoring and evaluation as well as the assessment and reassessment of their activities. Reforms in higher education institutions arising out of the application of the concept were to make the institutions more competitive, entrepreneurial or market-oriented (Clarke, 1998).

Indeed, the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had, in 1994 called for better management in the universities and a higher degree of accountability to society while the World Bank (1994) had also called for a greater autonomy in the management of universities and the introduction of evaluation and accountability mechanisms.

The relevance of the New Managerialism doctrine came into play in Ghana when the government’s inability to provide the needed resources to expand tertiary education to accommodate all qualified students led to liberalization to make room for private providers. The anticipated competition between the public higher education institutions - which had hitherto enjoyed a guaranteed supply of students and public resources - and the private institutions required the former to reposition itself to face the new realities. These realities included competing for staff and students and exploring new avenues to generate income to make up for the shortfall from traditional sources. Indeed, public higher education institutions in Ghana now had to brace themselves to face the impact of the global movement to turn higher education into a
marketable commodity. This could attract competition between themselves and providers from the private sector based on New Managerialist policies (Marginson, 2006). That, invariably, would lead to the opening up of the institutions for periodic assessments for accreditation, as demanded by the regulatory regime. Evidence of accreditation is often demanded by parents and state and international funding agencies (which provide funds for infrastructural and research projects etc.). Foreign universities into which Ghanaian students apply to pursue further studies, often request the accreditation status of the home institution where they had attended before considering such applications.

For the incoming private tertiary education providers, there was the need to put in regulatory mechanisms to prevent their profit motive from overriding quality provision. Compliance with set minimum standards to ensure national and international comparability of knowledge, skills and abilities, was paramount in this regard.

To all intents and purposes, the setting up of the accrediting agency in Ghana was to ensure compliance with the tenets espoused by the New Managerialist doctrine. These included direct and indirect regulation of the professional academic labour process and practice, as indicated above (Reed, 2002). The agency’s work also involved the design, implementation and monitoring of various control mechanisms geared to the detailed and relatively intrusive auditing and continuing evaluation of professional academic work in relation to various, externally-determined (by the accrediting agency) performance measures.

Again, in consonance with Reed’s (2002) assertions, the accrediting agency had reduced higher education needs and priorities to codifiable and measurable performance outcomes and indicators and these had become institutionalised benchmarks against which individual institutional operations and outcomes were assessed (for accreditation) and continually re-assessed (for reaccreditation). Having performed these functions over a period, this study seeks to determine the impact they have had as far as quality provision is concerned.

4.1.3 Neo Institutional Theory

The theory identifies professional mechanisms by which systems of organizations become more and more alike or “isomorphic” (Rhoades
Isomorphism is defined as importing and internalizing approved processes, techniques, ceremonies, and ideas from the external environment. The concept is often associated with organizational success and can convince external and internal monitors of the organization’s capability of change and readiness to modify its course by adopting externally approved structures and activities (Bloland, 1994).

The theory postulates that organizations constantly seek to maintain a fit between their practices and practices in the environment regarded as legitimate by the prevailing norms and values (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Scott, 1983). Organizations conforming to the collective normative order, which isomorphism brings, increase their ability to attract the flow of societal resources and enhance their “long-run survival prospects” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p.252). The chances of gaining, maintaining and increasing legitimacy, by an organization, are greatly enhanced under isomorphism.

Although proponents of the theory did not specifically talk about education, their expositions on legitimacy may be said to apply to education too and, perhaps even more so, than in the industrial or business world. This is so because education, unlike tangible products from factories, cannot be evaluated by customers as they do to products such as phones or cars. The distinction usually drawn by economists is that, in contrast to the normal ‘inspection goods’, education is an ‘experience good’ the quality of which can only be really assessed by customers afterwards, or even a ‘credence good’ whose quality can never be strictly evaluated (Bonroy & Constantatos, 2008; Dulleck & Kerschbamer, 2006). This enhances the argument for the importance of legitimacy in education and hence the need for the establishment of signalling devices such as accreditation’s ‘stamp of approval’ in that pursuit. Thus, the cardinal role legitimacy plays in the educational enterprise, how it is won or lost, is very crucial for the survival and continuation of educational organizations and for the operations of education in general (Bloland, 1994).

Changes brought about by isomorphism occur through three mechanisms: coercive isomorphism, mimetic isomorphism and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991b, p. 67). Coercive isomorphism emanates from sources such as governments, funding sources and other more influential organizations that can enforce the
legitimation or delegitimation of other organizations and their practices. In mimetic isomorphism, organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field of operation that they perceive to be more legitimate or more successful. In the contention of DiMaggio & Powell (1991), the ubiquity of certain kinds of structural arrangements can more likely be credited to the universality of mimetic processes than to any concrete evidence that the adopted models enhance efficiency. Meyer & Scott (1983) have also concluded from their research that once a nation accepts the principles of modernity, as reflected in symbols such as its constitution, it is also likely to adopt other modernizing elements, such as universalistic education systems. Normative isomorphism stems primarily from professionalization, which has been defined by Larson (1977) and by Collins (1979) as the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control “the production of producers” (Larson, 1977, p. 49-52), and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation to their occupational autonomy. Aspects of professionalization important to sources of isomorphism are two fold, as stated by DiMaggio & Powell (1991, p. 152): First is, ‘the resting of formal education and of legitimation in a cognitive base produced by university specialists. Second is the growth and elaboration of professional networks that span organizations and across which new models diffuse rapidly’.

Professional processes, including state of the art practices disseminated through professional associations, conferences and journals, and through associations, formal education and career mobility, are some of the key mechanisms through which such norms and values are acquired (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Through these identified professional processes, organizations become more and more alike or “isomorphic” in their formal policies and structures.

The theory clearly establishes, as related to Ghana and indeed in many other jurisdictions, that higher education institutions need legitimacy both to exist and to attract resources to enable them operate as such. This legitimacy needs to be acquired both formally – through complying with the demands of legislative enactments such as an institution submitting itself and its programmes for evaluation and accreditation – and informally – such as learning from others perceived to be more successful in the field. In the art of learning from each other
and adopting similar practices, institutions become more alike or isomorphic such that one does not need to ask how a university in Ghana looks or operates like even if one had not been to that country before. The three forms of isomorphism reviewed in this study – coercive, mimetic and normative – generate their individual and collective forms of pressures on higher education institutions, including those in Ghana that inform their various levels of compliance with the prescribed norms of the regulatory agencies. Hessels & Terjesen (2008) suggest that, ‘to the extent a firm sees itself as part of a global (rather than local) organisation field, the firm will progressively adopt the behaviours and processes that provide legitimacy within that field’. Ghanaian universities certainly want to be seen to be rubbing shoulders with their counterparts in the global world, for instance by having their graduates accepted for further studies in the so-called prestigious universities abroad. Some of these institutions also send their students to Ghanaian universities on exchange programmes. The overseas counterpart universities will deal only with those that had been duly accredited by the legal authorities locally. Compliance with the accreditation agency’s prescribed norms, to ensure their legitimate existence had additionally served as an image enhancer to Ghanaian universities globally. Whether the accreditation procedure had additionally made any impact, in terms of the quality development of these institutions, is what this study sets about to determine.

The isomorphic pressures that compel Ghanaian universities to comply with the prescribed requirements are further discussed in some detail in chapter seven of this study. Meanwhile, I take a look at another theoretical perspective and how it likely informs Ghanaian higher education institutions’ compliance with the quality requirements of the accrediting agency – the resource dependency theory.

### 4.1.4 Resource Dependency Theory

Like the doctrine of New Managerialism, the resource dependency theory provides us an idea about the relevance of financial tools, relative to the previous bureaucratic focus on regulation, in sometimes becoming the main tool for compliance by higher education institutions (in Ghana) with accreditation measures. In this regard, the resource dependency theory is therefore discussed to explain how funding (and
other resources) guide organisations’ - higher education institutions in this respect - behaviour in markets.

The theory focuses on the acquisition and exchange of resources from an organization’s environment to enable it operate and the implications the dependence on these resources may have on the internal structure of the organization. The resources in the environment constitute a basis of power as other organizations are also not only competing for them but may actually be controlling them. The theory highlights that legally independent organizations are dependent on each other – this dependence usually is not equal in terms of the opportunities they offer to each of the parties involved. Thus power and resource dependence are directly linked.

Two tenets are discernible from the Resource Dependency Theory about the concept of power and the influence those who possess it wield both within and outside the organization. What is of relevance to this study is however, the second tenet – that is, the influence actors who possess power wield outside the organization. This tenet of the Resource Dependency Theory deals with how the organization survives in the competitive environment.

The external tenet of the Resource Dependency Theory dealing with the survival of the university in a competitive environment is of direct interest to this study. 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.
In the universities’ exchanges with their environments, whether for inputs such as financial grants, faculty and students or outputs such as graduates and research results, the institutions have to compete for legitimacy and sustainability. Thus in almost all jurisdictions, universities must undergo some form of assessment and, or accredited in order to have access to resources – governmental or private – and for their products to be accepted into the world of work.

Comparing the two theories – resource dependency and institutional – Hessels & Terjesen (2010) state that both are concerned with the relationship between an organization and a set of actors in the environment. It is a common assumption by both theories that organizational choice is constrained by multiple external pressures in their quest at building legitimacy and acceptance by their external stakeholders. The focus of resource dependency theory is on an organization’s need to have access to resources from other actors in the environment while describing how resource scarcities force organizations to pursue new innovations that use alternative resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Sherer & Lee, 2002). Applying the theory to the Ghanaian higher education scene, one could observe the various lengths institutions go not only to achieve accredited status but also to maintain it in order to attract, especially full fee-paying students not only from Ghana but also from neighbouring countries. While students regularly check the accrediting body’s website to convince themselves of the good standing of the institutions before enrolling or continuing their studies in them, funding agencies, including the banks, seek the accrediting status of such institutions before having any dealings with them. Thus, the institutions strive to not only comply with the minimum standards, but also introduce acceptable innovations that will attract students and funders as well as give their products a competitive edge in the job market after graduation. This fits into the institutional theory, which describes how an organization adopts practices that are considered acceptable and legitimate within the organizational field (Scott. 1995).

Both theories share in the common description of how organizations face competitive pressures in their environments and may depend on other actors whose activities may have an influence on such organizations within those environments. Examples of such actors are accrediting bodies and funding agencies, in the case of higher education
institutions. The theories, however, differ in the explanations they proffer on why the activities of other actors have an impact on organizations within the environment (Hessels & Terjesen, 2010). 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 organization 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.

This topic is treated in some detail in the article on, the Impact of accreditation on public and private universities: A comparative study, in chapter seven of this thesis.