

# **The Emergence of Private Higher Education and the Issue of Quality Assurance in Ghana, the Role of National Accreditation Board (NAB)**

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The aim of this paper is to examine the growth of private higher education in Ghana, looking at some of the reasons and consequences of this growth. The paper further discusses the characteristics of the private university colleges and the quality assurance framework for private institutions in Ghana.

## **Introduction**

The rapid growth and expansion of private institutions of higher learning in many countries of the world has been a well documented reality of the last few years. Efforts to widen participation in higher education across the world have had considerable success. Student enrolment worldwide increased from 13 million in 1960 to 82 million in 1995 and to 137 million in 2005 (UNESCO, 1998, 2007). The growing number of private higher education institution is a noticeable feature of this expansion in several regions, including Sub-Sahara Africa. According to UNESCO (2006), the private sector plays a large role in three regions, namely Latin America, East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. In Sub-Saharan African, the development of a private sector in higher education has been seen as a solution to widening participation and is embedded in reform measures of the sector (Varghese, 2004).

New sites of higher education are proliferating. Most of Western Europe tends to be dominated by public universities, with over 95 per cent of students attending them. However, internationally, private higher education is ‘one of the most dynamic and fast-growing segments of post-secondary education at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (Altbach, 1999: 1). The growth of private higher education is noticeable in countries in transition and quality assurance, in the form of accreditation, offers some global benchmarks. Literature in support of this trend appears to cite the benefits and strengths of the private institutions to justify their existence.

The growth of the private-sector universities has been a dominant feature of the past decade. Quddus and Rashid, (2000) noted that this phenomenon is part of a world-wide movement away from state control and management to what they called ‘a new faith in the efficacy of free market mechanisms to allocate resources most efficiently’.

Many higher education systems worldwide were reformed and expanded extensively in the last decade and Ghana is no exception. In 1987, the Government of Ghana constituted a University Rationalization Committee (URC) to develop proposals for reforming the management, academic structure and funding of tertiary education in Ghana. The Committee undertook its work over the period 1986-88, and submitted the final report in 1988. The URC undertook a thorough job of reviewing the current situation of tertiary education in Ghana, and of suggesting a way forward from the demoralized and depressed state then experienced within the sector. Following the submission of the Committee’s report, the government issued a White Paper in 1991 on the reforms to the Tertiary education system. The policy framework recommended by the URC was subsequently re-formulated as a White Paper, Reforms to the

Tertiary Education System (1991). This served to clarify the Government's commitment to the new policies both within Ghana and beyond it. The reforms fell into four main policy objectives, one of which is the:

- Significant expansion of the tertiary education system as a whole, to meet the demands of school leavers and the needs of employers, and to provide greater opportunity of access to those previously denied it.

Since higher education reforms were started in the mid-1980s, higher education in Ghana has experienced significant transformations. Changes have not only been revealed by the increase in numbers of undergraduates, but also by a significant expansion in postgraduate education. The number of higher education institutions expanded rapidly in the last decade particularly the private university colleges as a response to an increase in student enrolment.

There are different types of private higher institutions in Ghana – university colleges, diploma awarding institutions, theological colleges, professional and specialized institutions and tutorial colleges. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the private non-state university colleges. These institutions are either self-financing or are supported by religious agencies. Christians and Islamic organizations are active in providing private higher education in the Ghana. A large number of institutions of higher education are supported or sponsored by the Christian organizations. For instance the first accredited private university college - now Valley View University is established by the 7<sup>th</sup> day Adventist church. Most of the private institutions operating in the country are for-profit institutions. They rely heavily on student fees as

their major source of financing the institutions and do offer programmes in market-friendly subject areas.

As noted by Varghese (2004b), public universities had a near monopoly in providing higher education in countries of Africa until recently. In Ghana, there was a state monopoly on tertiary education immediately after independence like other African nations. The State funded all the public universities with the view of training the manpower needed for the rapid development of the nation. As Balderson (1979) put it ‘the period of state monopoly in higher education, especially till the 1970s, was considered to be the ‘golden period’ in higher education’.

In Ghana, the reconstruction period that follows independence from the British was championed by the state and the public sector units. The tertiary education system in Ghana was originally modelled on the British system and was designed to educate an elite corps to gradually take up roles in the civil service played by expatriates.

Although it was initially believed that capital was the missing link in development in Ghana, it was soon realized that in the absence of human capital, even physical capital could not be productively developed. This assertion is supported by Harbison (1973). He pointed out that human resource is a very important input. He regards human resources as the ultimate basis for the wealth of nations. They are “the active agents of production who accumulate capitals, exploit natural resources, build and develop social, political and economic organizations that plan and implement national development programme”. He concludes “clearly, a country which is unable to develop the skills and knowledge of its people and to utilize them effectively in the national economy will be unable to develop anything else”.

During this initial stage, the government of Ghana depended heavily on foreign capital and foreign personnel for some crucial areas of nation building due to lack of qualified and trained local manpower. In view of this, the government emphasized the development of higher education to train the needed manpower to take over from the foreign expertise.

### **Reasons for the emergence and growth of private higher institutions in Ghana**

There has been an upsurge in the desire, particularly by religious bodies to establish private universities in Ghana. If there has been any major change in education in Ghana, none has been more dramatic than the change experienced in the private institution sector over the last decade. Private higher education is one of the most dynamic and fast growing segments of post-secondary education in Ghana over the last decade. These institutions emerged in Ghana in the 1990s and have made significant in roads in to the country's educational sector. Since then, the number of nationally-recognised private universities has risen steadily.

There are numerous reasons for their emergence on a large scale. The expansion of private education is linked to massification throughout the world. For instance, in Asia alone, it is estimated that the demand for higher education will grow by 48 million students between 1995 and 2020 (Newman and Couturier, 2002). More recently, there has been a noticeable shift from public to private provision in Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. In countries and regions where governments are unable to provide sufficient funding for higher education, for

example, Sub-Saharan Africa, private education is flourishing. Singh (2001) stated that this global explosion is accompanied and facilitated by a conceptual shift that suggests that higher education is a private, rather than a public good. It is a product one buys, rather than a process one enters.

Developments and reforms in the 1980s such as the market-friendly reforms initiated under the structural adjustment programmes, the deregulation policies, and the financial crisis of the state, created an encouraging environment for the emergence of the private higher education sector in Ghana. The dominant trends during this phase indicated a reduced public investment in education in general, and a diversion of public investment from higher to primary education in developing countries in particular. This was the result of the adoption of a “rate of returns analysis”, which showed that returns to primary education are higher than those at other levels of education. This was justified in terms of economic rationality and allocative efficiency involving a diversion of resources from higher to primary education (World Bank, 1986, Banya & Juliet, 2001).

Varghese (2001) noted that higher education systems in the developed world responded to the declining state support by the withdrawal of subsidies on higher education. Developing countries too began responding to these changes rather late. They introduced various reforms that reduced reliance on the state for the progress of higher education. Education reforms adopted by most of the countries indicated cost-reduction measures, cost-sharing strategies, and income-generating activities. Ghana on her part responded to these developments by introducing reforms such as cost-

sharing in the public institutions in the 1980s in a bid to reduce the reliance of higher institutions on state funding.

Consequently, Ghana which in the past was committed to public-only systems of tertiary education now no longer had the financial capacity to respond to the level of demand for tertiary education. Ghana therefore adopted legislation that allows for the development of a private higher education sector. This has led to rapid growth in the private provision of higher education over the last decade.

Public higher education institutions have also undergone major privatization processes through growing reliance on cost-sharing arrangements and income generation measures. Many public utility and support services and student support systems are contracted out to private agencies on a full pricing basis. This also involves the withdrawal of subsidies on lodging and food provided in the student hostels and cafeteria respectively. Students were subsequently supported through the introduction of the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) loan scheme. Students in public higher institutions now were requested to pay for both academic and facility user fees. The public higher institutions also introduced a kind of quota system where some students (known in the local parlance as fee paying) pay a higher rate of fees all in a bid to generate income for the efficient running of the institutions.

Furthermore, the inability of the public sector to satisfy the growing social demand for higher education has necessitated the entry of the private sector in order to expand access conditions. There was certainly a big demand for higher educational

programmes in Ghana which the state-funded universities were unable to satisfy. Simply put, demand for places far exceeded what the public universities could supply. On the average, only about forty-nine percent of qualified applicants gain admission to the public universities creating a demand-supply gap of about fifty-one percent (Oduro & Senadza, 2004).

Varghese (2004 b) maintained that private-sector university enterprises have appeared to cater for a demand in the market, and their role could best be described as supplementing the state system rather than supplanting it. We now have a situation where the two sectors exist side-by-side in delivering higher education to Ghanaians.

As stated by James (1991) the increasing social demand for higher education and the demand for a different type of education led to initiating policy measures encouraging the private sector in many countries, where previously there existed a virtual monopoly of public higher education institutions. This assertion was further supported by Bollag (1999a) who noted that, the rapid growth of non-state institutions in Ghana has been fuelled by a strong demand for education and a limited number of places for students at the state universities – which, until recently, had a monopoly on higher education in the region. The legislative measures initiated to establish private institutions of higher education also helped the entry of cross-border education, which is offered mainly through private providers.

### **Role of National Accreditation Board (NAB) in enhancing quality in private higher institutions**

In every advanced society, the problems of higher education are problems associated with growth. Growth poses a variety of problems for the education systems that experience it and for the society that support them. These problems arise in every part of higher education. The White Paper recommended that regulatory bodies should be established with the mandate to ensuring quality tertiary education and to ensure the maintenance of academic standards. The National Accreditation Board was thus established by the Government of Ghana in 1993 with the mandate to help resolve these problems and assist enhance quality education in Ghana. With its establishment, the regulatory framework has become more elaborate and formalized. The guiding principle for the development of the quality assurance system for Ghana higher education after 1993 was for the higher education institutions to demonstrate that their educational programmes met criteria as contained in registration institution and accreditation of programmes.

NAB has strict legislation on the registration process for the establishment of private university colleges. To assist institutions to prepare for evaluation, NAB prepared a questionnaire which outlines the material that the institution is expected to provide for the panel of assessors both prior to and during the panel visit.

An approach was developed based on self-evaluation followed by peer review by visiting committees. There are guidelines and specifications which apply to the programme facilities, teaching and non teaching staff, admission requirements, governance of the institution, etc. The law requires that every higher institution should be accredited by the Board to enable it to regulate the quality of its programmes. In carrying out assessment for the licensing of a private institution to operate, the

institution as a whole is evaluated after which each programme is also assessed. In devising its manual for use during the accreditation/assessment of the institutions and programmes, NAB developed a set of questionnaire/instruments. The purpose of the instruments is to guide and provide a structure both for the institution as it undertakes its self-assessment associated with assessment, and for the assessment panel as it undertakes its evaluation and review of the institution's processes and activities. Visits to specific areas of the institution might also take place if to do so is beneficial to the assessment.

Financing higher education is the main problem in most developing and underdeveloped countries. Every nation seeks to globalise its local and national standards of higher education so as to make it competitive in an international market. It is essential to assess the financial resources in order to ensure the quality of higher education. To devise appropriate framework for private institutions in Ghana, NAB does a thorough assessment and auditing of all available financial sources and budget of the institutions. The Board also judges the competences and faculty resources available at the institutions.

### **Characteristics of private universities colleges in Ghana**

#### **Size and courses of private university colleges**

Today, the private sector is the fastest growing segment in higher education in Ghana. As of January, 2009, there are about 31 accredited private university colleges and three Distance learning institutions in Ghana offering courses of various kinds. Their numbers outnumber the public universities, however, their student intake accounts for

a relatively low percent of total student enrolment in higher education in the country. This is because most of the institutions do not have enough facilities to admit more students. For example, the Evangelical University College's first intake is about 57 students. It is a common practice for private institutions to operate in rented premises which were not designed initially for teaching and which have required hasty alterations to make the premises suitable as places of learning.

All private higher institutions have to be registered and granted accreditation by the National Accreditation Board before commencement. These institutions are affiliated to degree-awarding universities for purposes of supervision and certification. Majority of the institutions are in affiliation with public universities within the country such as the University of Ghana, University of Cape Coast and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Some of the institutions have established collaboration with foreign institutions. For instance, Regent University College of Science & Technology established in 2004 has collaborations with institutions in Germany and Sweden for the certification of their programmes.

### **Courses offered by private institutions**

The public universities have many Faculties, Schools and Institutes offering courses in a variety of disciplines. As noted by Varghese (2004b), the goals and orientation of the operation of private universities are different from that of the public institutions. Since many of them are self-financing and profit generating, they have to offer courses that have a premium both in the education market and the employment of graduates. In this sense, the education and labour markets give signals to the private institutions; the success of these institutions depends upon their ability to respond quickly to such responses.

The programmes that are mounted by these institutions reflect either a commercial consideration or a religious orientation. The institutions offer courses that require less investment in terms of infrastructure and equipments. Professional and vocational courses are the popular courses that are offered in these institutions. Thaver (2003) notes that these institutions offer selected courses and they are better understood as ‘boutique’ institutions as distinct from the supermarket model of public universities. Almost all the university colleges including the religiously supported ones offer commercially related courses in business administration (with options in management, human resource management, marketing, banking and finance), as well as in information and communication technology, which requires lower levels of investment in infrastructure facilities. None of these institutions has ventured into Engineering and Medical sciences.

### **5.55 Student body**

In Ghana, the demand for higher education is high and the state-funded universities have to turn away a large number of applicants each year, leading to a backlog of potential students. Competition for admission into public universities is very keen. As the number of public-funded higher education institutions in Ghana is limited, the competition for student places can be intensive. The numbers of qualified applicants far exceed the available vacancies leading to only a few applicants with a strong aggregate entry score to be admitted. As revealed by Oduro and Senadza (2004) on the average, only forty-nine percent of qualified applicants gain admission to the public universities creating a demand-supply gap of fifty-one percent.

The end result is that a large number of applicants who could not be admitted in the public institutions find themselves in the private institutions. In other words, the chances are that the academic profile of the participants may be lower in private higher institutions when compared with their counterparts in the public universities.

### **5.56 Teaching capacity in the private institutions**

Many of the private institutions operate with a limited number of faculty/staff members. One major difficulty with these institutions is the fact that they do not have adequate and qualified teaching and administrative staff. They have very few regular staff and tend to depend on a large number of part-time lecturers mostly from the public universities. Most staff combines salaries by working at state funded institutions and at a private institution. In a recent study, Varghese (2004b) found out that reliance on part-time teachers is a common feature among private universities irrespective of their location and orientation. The result of this phenomenon is the negative impact it has on the performance of such lecturers who are already overwhelmed with their work at the public universities. This is because some of these lecturers are found working in many institutions on a part-time basis, a phenomenon evident from the NAB staff database. In view of this, teaching is the main function carried out by the private institutions. They do not have resources and facilities to carry out research.

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