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Affiliation policy rhetoric and reality in the Ghanaian higher education context

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ABSTRACT

The present affiliation policy regime of Ghana's higher education system has existed for more than two decades. However, empirical studies to examine the policy rhetoric and reality with regard to building quality assurance capacity in mentored institutions appear non-existent. This paper is based on an illustrative qualitative case study undertaken to examine the achievements and challenges of implementing the policy to build internal quality assurance capacities in mentored institutions. The study was guided by Institutional Theory using 12 key informant in-depth interviews and document reviews as data collection sources. The findings indicate a minimal achievement of the policy intent on internal quality assurance capacity building due to key implementation challenges such as a tripartite relationship structure; increasing cost on mentored institutions and increasing workload on mentor institutions. The study concludes that the gap between the policy rhetoric and reality in the studied mentored institutions appears undesirable and requires stakeholders' attention.

KEYWORDS

Quality assurance strategy; affiliation policy; higher education; Ghana

Introduction

One of the major higher education policies in Ghana is affiliation, which occur in the form of institutional and program affiliations. It is used as a quality assurance strategy to maintain standards and enhance quality in mentored education higher institutions.

The concept of affiliation in higher education appears to have different meanings in different higher education contexts, and therefore defies a single definition. It has been defined as a partnership in which two or more higher education institutions agree to collaborate for a number of reasons including awarding degrees or gaining other forms of academic recognition (Harman, 2004). The key ideas in this definition are collaboration and partnership for different reasons. It implies affiliation could mean more than one institution accrediting and awarding degrees of another. There could be other collaborations such as joint research and exchange programs involving staff and students of both institutions (Bernasconi, 2006; Hopkin & Lee, 2001; Nembou, 2013). Affiliation in higher education has also been conceptualised as an agreement where one

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higher education institution relinquishes part of its authority in favour of some form of tutelage from another institution for the strengthening of institutional capacity of the institution that relinquished part of its authority (Bernasconi, 2006). This definition also connotes some form of collaboration and partnership for mutual benefits. One institution trades part of its authority for institutional capacity-building or tutelage from another. The affiliation concept has also been captured differently as ‘dependent’ higher- or post-secondary educational institutions, such as colleges and universities, offering programs leading to awards validated by a ‘parent’ university or a recognised body (Hopkin & Lee, 2001). This definition appears to capture affiliation as a mentorship relationship where one institution mentors another for institutional capacity-building for the institution being mentored. It is discernible from the definitions that affiliation in higher education in all its forms is about enhanced capacity for maintaining standards and improving quality for recognition, legitimacy or collaborations. The conceptualisations also indicate that affiliation may be based on voluntary agreement or policy requirements of particular higher education settings (Bernasconi, 2006; Hopkin & Lee, 2001; Nembou, 2013).

The present affiliation policy regime in Ghana’s higher education seems to capture a mentorship relationship conceptualisation where newly established higher education institutions receive mentorship for a minimum of 10 years before they are granted autonomy to award degrees and diplomas. One of the primary intents of the policy is quality assurance capacity building in the mentored institutions to ensure maintenance of standards and enhancement of quality in the higher education system.

Ghana’s higher education system and the affiliation practice

Ghana’s higher education sector includes universities and non-universities. Currently, the country boasts of 9 public traditional universities, 7 quasi-public institutions, 8 public technical universities, 2 public polytechnics, 30 public colleges of nursing, 46 public colleges of education and over 65 private higher education institutions, including for-profit and non-profit (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2016). These education institutions are geographically situated across the country to improve access and enhance equity in higher education provision. The mode of higher education provision has also changed. In addition to the traditional on-campus provision, programs are now offered via distance. This has led to the emergence of non-traditional learners such as mature age and part-time students (Mohamedbai, 2008).

The above developments seem to be raising quality concerns which demand a robust national quality assurance regime (Ansah, 2015). The national quality assurance body, the National Accreditation Board

(NAB), has been reforming its quality assurance strategies to be more responsive to quality concerns in the sector. NAB in 2010 introduced a new legislative instrument (National Accreditation Board of Ghana, 1984, 2010) to strengthen its policy on institutional and program affiliations for higher education institutions. LI 1984 requires a minimum of 10 years affiliation period for mentored institutions instead of 4 years which was in existence. Also, the NAB’s eligibility criteria for mentor institutions are: (i) autonomy to award degrees and diplomas granted for a minimum of 5 years; (ii) graduated the first batch of students in the program area it intends to mentor another

higher education institution and (iii) adequate and qualified Senior Academic Members to supervise the program(s) to be mentored. The rest are: (iv) active accreditation for a program in area a program is to be mentored; (v) proven ability of mentoring more than one institution in the same program and (vi) submission of report on the program area demonstrating track record of research output in the program area for which the prospective institutions requires affiliation (Yakubu, 2015). In addition, LI 1984 sets the following obligations for a mentor institution:

- (a) It has a faculty or department that offers the program for which affiliation is being sought;
- (b) A co-ordinator not below the rank of a senior lecturer is appointed to maintain an active linkage with the mentor institution;
- (c) The appointment of an experienced external examiner or moderator for the program is done in consultation with the mentored institution;
- (d) An annual report or appraisal of the mentored institution's activities for each academic year is prepared;
- (e) After each 4-year period, a detailed evaluation of steps of the achievement of the aims and objectives of the mentored institution is submitted to the Board;
- (f) The graduating students of the mentored institutions merit the certificates awarded to them and
- (g) The records of students of the mentored institution are kept in electronic form.

Enacting quality assurance in Ghanaian higher education via affiliation dates back to the pre-independence era when the first university in Ghana, the University College of Gold Coast was established in 1948 and affiliated to the University of London (Girdwood, 1999). The University College of Gold Coast (now University of Ghana) automatically became part of University of London and its academic programs were subject to the same kinds of quality control of University of London, including external examiners and other aspects of these systems (Materu, 2007). However, this relationship was severed when Ghana gained independence in 1957. The University College of Gold Coast attained sovereign university status; its name was changed to University of Ghana and given the powers to award its own degrees in 1961 (Girdwood, 1999). Kumasi College of Technology (now Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology) was also established in 1952 and affiliated to University of London until it gained university status in 1961. This was followed by the establishment of University College of Cape Coast (now University of Cape Coast) in 1962 and affiliated to University of Ghana until 1971 when it gained full university status (Kwarteng, Boadi-Siaw, & Dwarko, 2012).

After the colonial period, these three universities (popularly known in Ghana as the traditional universities) became autonomous universities without any external quality control after their affiliation periods until 1993 when the NAB was established to provide external quality assurance for all higher education institutions and their study programs. The affiliation concept was re-enacted with the birth of NAB. The NAB required all newly established higher education institutions to go through a process of mentorship before receiving autonomy to award degrees and diplomas.

This present affiliation policy has been implemented for more than two decades. However, there are no empirical studies that have focused on the achievements and challenges of the implementation of the policy from the narratives of mentor and mentored institutions. This has resulted in a dearth of information on the achievements and challenges of the affiliation policy with respect to maintaining standards and enhancing quality in the mentored institutions through quality assurance capacity building.

This paper is based on an illustrative qualitative case study that examined the achievements and challenges of implementing the present affiliation policy to build quality assurance capacity in mentored institutions for the maintenance of standards and enhancement of quality. The aim was to provide illustrative insights into mentor and mentored institutions' experiences with the policy rhetoric and reality from a quality assurance capacity-building standpoint.

Theoretical perspective

Institutional theory guided this inquiry. Support for institutional theory was also provided by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Papadimitriou (2011). Institutional theory is based on the assumption that organisations, such as higher education institutions, operate in an environment dominated by rules, requirements, understandings, and taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes appropriate or acceptable organisational forms and behaviour (Scott, 1987). These pressures of the institutional environment, such as the one associated with affiliation, compel higher education institutions to modify their behaviour to become isomorphic to institutions within their particular environment because nonconformity may threaten their legitimacy and continued existence (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oliver, 1997). Isomorphism according to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) emanates from coercive, mimetic and normative forces. Coercive forces stem from political/legal influence and the quest for legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These pressures are evident when powerful organisations such as Ghana's NAB compel less powerful organisations like university colleges to act in compliance to certain actions and behaviours to receive benefits such as attainment of accreditation and subsequently offer them legitimacy (Edwards, Mason, & Washington, 2009). Coercive pressure is present in Ghana's higher education sector because government, professional and regulatory agencies are dominant (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Mimetic forces result from standard responses to uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Mimetic force encourages organisations, such as mentored higher education institutions, to copy best practices from Ghanaian public universities tagged to offer quality education (Galaskiewicz & Wasserman, 1989). Mentored institutions which engage in these acts seem to model themselves to resemble public universities in Ghana to enhance their legitimacy. Normative force on the other hand relates to professionalism. Professionalism, as explained by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) means members of a particular occupation collectively setting standards and expectations for practice. These practices, norms and values are conveyed to members via deliberate techniques such as workshops, public lectures, seminars, short courses periodicals, magazines and manuals (Janosik, 2009). Members of this fraternity, such as university teachers in Ghana, are required to exhibit similar traits and characteristics in order to gain legitimacy (Jonhston, 2013). This has impact on the higher education

institutions these professionals work for since their credentials and experiences suggest whether an organisation is legitimate or not (Jonhston, 2013). This theoretical orientation has been used as an interpretive framework to explain the affiliation regime implemented in the Ghanaian higher education sector.

Methods

A qualitative case study methodology was preferred for this study because our aim was to get illustrative insights into how the affiliation policy is understood and implemented to deliver its intent of quality assurance capacity building in mentored institutions. To help us understand complex real-life policy dynamics like the affiliation policy in question requires either experience or specific cases that we can learn from (Eisner, 1998). Although it is unusual for the outcome of a case study to generalise in the way that natural science data can, this is possible (Denzin, 2009). It has been claimed that knowledge transfer occurs through outcomes of case studies (Eisner, 1998; Yin, 2014).

We pursued this illustrative insight by purposively selecting two traditional universities known to be mentors for more than half of the institutions under mentorship in Ghana's higher education system. We also purposively selected two mentored institutions who had been under mentorship of the two traditional universities for more than 10 years but had not received charter status. These institutions were selected based on their long-standing experiences with the affiliation policy implementation. In addition, two officers from NAB with responsibility for quality assurance and for that matter the affiliation policy were also purposively selected as study participants.

We contacted the gatekeepers of the NAB, the two traditional universities and the two mentored- institutions. We explained the purpose of the study to enable us obtain permission to undertake this study (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003). Two senior officers from the NAB's quality assurance department, two senior officers (Affiliation officer and Director for Academic Affairs) from each of the two traditional universities (mentors), and three senior officers (Registrars, Quality Assurance Officers and Presidents) from each of the two mentored institutions were in-depth interviewed. These persons were selected because the positions they occupy in their institutions make them knowledgeable about the affiliation policy and its implementation (Patton, 2002). Before the commencement of each interview, we sought permission from them by ensuring that they signed a consent form. We explained the rules of the interviews in order not to leave them in doubt as to what to expect during and after the interviews (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The participants offered their offices for the conduction of the interviews because they deemed this space to be conducive. We used an interview guide with already prepared questions but also refrained from forcing interviewees to stick strictly to our questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Through these interactions, the views and experiences of the key informants on the affiliation policy implementation emerged. All the interview sessions lasted for approximately 1 hour, were audio taped and later transcribed.

Interviews provided the core data for this study but additional data was provided by relevant affiliation policy and practice documents. These included the NAB's Legislative Instrument (LI 1984) and Affiliation Barometer. These documents were

used to provide context information and also to triangulate data from the interviews (Denzin, 1970). Photocopies of these documents were made after permission was granted us.

With the support of Nvivo 11 software, data from interviews and the documents were coded, categorised and thematically analysed to make meaning (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014). The main categories of issues that emerged from the analysis are: affiliation conceptualisation, implementation processes and procedures, achievements and challenges. These themes form the main discussion of this paper. Being guided by ethical principles, we used pseudonym to de-identify the key informants and the institutions they work for.

Findings and discussion

In this section, we present the findings and discussion along the lines of the themes that emerged from the data analysis. It is our considered view that when the themes are put together, they help address the key research questions that guided the study. The key research questions were:

- (1) How has the affiliation policy implementation in Ghanaian higher education been experienced by mentor and mentored institutions?
- (2) What are the achievements of the affiliation policy regarding quality assurance capacity building in mentored institutions?
- (3) What challenges are faced by mentor and mentored institutions in the implementation of the affiliation policy in Ghanaian higher education?

Affiliation conceptualisations

The NAB's Legislative Instrument 1984 (National Accreditation Board of Ghana, 2010) defines affiliation as,

'An accredited institution shall operate under the supervision of a recognized institution which shall award its certificates for the accredited institution under its supervision until the grant of a Charter to the accredited institution (section 19 subsection 2).'

Participants, however, expressed their conceptualisation of the affiliation policy differently. The two respondents from NAB perceived the concept the same way but different from participants from the mentor and mentored institutions. The NAB's participants quoted this definition:

Affiliation is a relationship agreement between a newly-established higher education institution/prospective higher institution and any nationally-recognised chartered higher institution to provide academic support and supervision to a mentored institution to ensure the attainment and maintenance of high standards for the promotion of academic quality.

Interestingly, this definition is not found in the NAB's legislative instrument (LI 1984) that governs the policy but it provides an indication of how the policy is conceptualised by staff of the NAB secretariat.

In the mentor institutions, a participant captures affiliation this way:

Affiliation for us simply refers to mentoring of new institutions in the area of the processes, examinations, recruitment of qualified staff and certification. First of all, we look at academic quality processes, quality assurance processes, student numbers, admission whether you meet national requirements, funding base, quality of staff and numbers, students staff ratio and programs you run whether they are of national relevance and at the end of the day, we put our seal on their graduates by giving them our certificates. We do this until they are ready to operate as independent institutions, then we recommend them to receive a Presidential Charter. This is something required by regulation.

Definitions given by remaining participants from the mentor institutions are similar to this one. For example, another participant put it this way:

Affiliation for us simply refers to mentoring of new institutions in the area of the processes, examinations, recruitment of qualified staff and certification, which is NAB's requirement for new higher education institutions.

Definitions of participants from the mentored institutions appeared slightly different. Examples of participants in mentored institutions are:

My impression is that, you have existed for so long, you have known, taught these programs in your institutions and therefore formal interactions with us will help us to know what to do. I see it as interaction because sometimes we have the right calibre of people to deliver our programs but then inexperienced people from the mentor institutions challenging very experienced people who have retired from public institutions and have taken on post-retirement appointments in mentored institutions.

I see affiliation as formal interactions with mentor institutions to guide us to know what to do, and this is a mandatory requirement by NAB.

Putting all the definitions together suggests affiliation conceptualisation that speaks to a dual relationship between a mentor and a mentored institution for the purposes of maintaining standards and enhancing the quality of higher education in Ghana. This is because there is no mentioning of NAB's role in all the conceptualisations provided by the participants. The dual relationship appears to be consistent with the views of Harman (2004). According to this author, affiliation is a mutual agreement where the affiliating partner agrees to accredit the academic programs and issues academic awards to an affiliated partner institution. Nonetheless, the definitions given by participants from mentor and mentored institutions of which some have quoted here indicate an expression of involuntary approach rather than mutual agreement. The mandatory nature is supported by the NAB's legislation, LI 1984.

The notions contained in the definitions exhibit isomorphism. It suggests a situation where mentored institutions are destined to become similar to mentor institutions through coercive, mimetic and normative forces in order to gain recognition and legitimacy (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008; Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Meyer, 2017). However, a critical analysis of the definitions reveals some nuances in the stakeholders' preferred isomorphism. The use of 'supervision' by NAB and mentor institutions participants describe a situation of coercive isomorphism, which implies that the mentored institutions are to be forced to engage in similar practices of quality assurance as their mentor institutions. This is probably due to the fact that affiliation is supported by a legislative instrument in the Ghanaian higher education sector. In this

case, to consider affiliation as a mutual agreement as argued by Harman (2004) might not hold for higher education in Ghana because it is not voluntary. The definitions of the mentored institutions, on the other hand, corroborate a prevailing situation of coercive isomorphism but indicate a nuanced preference of normative isomorphism. This is evidenced by the claim that professional standards transmitted by experienced senior academic members who are on post-retirement contracts appear challenged by perceived inexperienced academics from mentor institutions. This is probably so because of the power dynamics brought about by the affiliation legislation. The legislation gives the mentor institutions certain powers of enforcement as stated in the definition of the legislative instrument LI 1984 (2010). The claim suggests that the power dynamics between the mentor and mentored prevents the natural transmission of professional standards from the experienced senior academic staff who are on post-retirement contract.

It stands to reason that in the particular context of Ghana affiliation is compulsory because the regulatory framework accepts for-profit-making higher education institutions to be established. These reasons make compulsory affiliation understandable because it safeguards public interest against the tendencies of compromising standards and quality for profit motives. Nonetheless, the flipside of this argument suggests that passing on covert practices of compromise on standards and quality from mentor institutions to mentored institutions is also possible even though no evidence has been reported yet. This appears to give credence to normative isomorphism underpinned in the conceptualisation of affiliation by mentored institutions. Besides, conceptualising affiliation in a coercive manner may lead to ‘game playing’ and stifle innovation in the mentored institutions.

Affiliation implementation processes and procedures in Ghana

The findings indicate that the affiliation policy implementation in the Ghanaian higher education is based on a tripartite relationship involving the NAB, mentor institutions and mentored institutions. It emerged that the mentored institutions receive direct supervision from mentor institutions and NAB concurrently. The following quotes provide evidence for this claim. A participant from a mentored institution claims:

NAB came to conduct academic audit and certified that we have complied with the national entry requirements for students’ admission. After they left, our mentor institution came to conduct similar exercise and rejected students who had been given the green light by NAB on entry requirements. Our mentor institution claims that the national requirements permit the use of ‘Social Studies’ in place of ‘Integrated Science’ for admission but it is not acceptable to them and they will not award certificates to our graduates if we do not follow their requirements. So must we do exactly as they do when our mission and vision statements are different?

Participants from NAB confirm the notion of concurrent supervision. A participant narrated:

They are affiliated to universities but we still conduct academic audit periodically to ensure that they are not compromising on standards and quality. Even in the mentor institutions in the country, we conduct academic audit periodically to satisfy ourselves that standards are being maintained and quality is being enhanced. When they meet the national

minimum requirements, then we ask them to follow the directives of their mentor institutions because they issue the certificates. We also have affiliation barometer for the mentored institutions to assess the performance of the mentor institutions annually.

This quote captures almost everything said by the remaining participant from NAB.

The quotations provide empirical evidence of a tripartite affiliation relationship in practice and not an indication of different stages of quality assurance. Under the concept of different stages of quality assurance, NAB is expected to use reports from mentor institutions for validation exercises or undertake quality assurance activities outside the remit of mentor institutions. NAB conducting quality audit exercises in mentored institutions which is to be done by the mentor institutions is duplication of effort or a case of doubting the capability of mentor institutions to carry the quality assurance mandate effectively. This practice of using tripartite structure for the implementation of the affiliation policy appears unique to the Ghanaian higher education system. This is because affiliation policy implementation reported in the literature (Bernasconi, 2006; Hopkin & Lee, 2001; Nembou, 2013) has been based on dual structure where the mentorship and/or supervision of mentored institutions is done by only the mentor institutions and not with the national quality assurance agency at the same time.

The achievements on quality assurance capacity building

The issues that emerged in the study also include participants' views on the achievement of the present affiliation policy regime regarding quality assurance capacity building in mentored institutions. The mentor institutions' participants were largely of the view that affiliation policy has been successful in building quality assurance capacities in mentored institutions. A participant made this claim:

To a large extent, I should say it has achieved its purpose. Within the last couple of weeks, we had one of our mentored institutions receiving a Presidential Charter; the first was in 2002 and now in 2016 we have another.

Another added:

The present affiliation policy is relevant. I can tell you that some of the things we uncover and help the mentored institutions to address are such that if that were not the case you would wonder the kinds of people who would be put on the labour market for us. Sometimes we have to be sure that they have the right calibre of staff, if they don't have the staff that meet the norm of NA and B NCTE, we don't affiliate with you. If there were no mentorships, people would get up and put up two-bedroom apartment, and call it a university and be planning their own thing.

The mentored institutions participants were rather ambivalent about the present affiliation policy regime with respect to quality assurance capacity building in mentored institution. They wanted mentorship but certainly not in the form of the present affiliation policy. A participant indicated:

I don't think it's the affiliation with our mentors that has contributed to improvement in our institution's quality assurance capacity but the quality assurance supervision of NAB itself.

Another participant concluded:

In the absence of a better system of ensuring that newly established institutions do not go wayward, we would take it for now but it needs improvement. The Committee of Independent Universities (CIU) has submitted a request for change in the present affiliation arrangement to direct supervision of mentored institutions by NAB.

The comments from the two groups of participants indicate mixed views on the achievements of the present affiliation policy regime regarding quality assurance capacity building in mentored institutions. Nonetheless, both groups appreciate some level of achievement with the policy implementation, particularly, the maintenance of standards in the mentored institutions which obviously is a key intent of the affiliation policy. Given that the mentor institutions of this study provide mentorship for more than half of mentored institutions with only four receiving Presidential Charters, it is plausible to argue that the affiliation policy's achievement with regard to quality assurance capacity building is minimal. This is because internal quality assurance capacity is the primary indicator of receiving autonomy.

Challenges with the affiliation policy implementation

The findings reveal several challenges associated with the present implementation architecture of the affiliation policy. Themes that emerged include: financial burden on mentored institutions, innovation dilemmas of mentored institutions and over-stretched capacity of mentor institutions.

Financial burden on mentored institutions

One of the implementation challenges of the affiliation policy in its present form as articulated by the study participants is financial burden on the mentored institutions as a result of the tripartite structure of implementation. Services are duplicated and paid for separately. This theme emerged from responses provided by both mentored and mentor institutions. A participant from a mentored institution expressed the financial burden this way,

Presently we pay five thousand dollars (\$5000) per year as institutional affiliation fee and pay separate fee (\$2,000) for each program we submit for affiliation. Some mentor-institutions even charge per student. At the same time, we pay ten thousand Ghana cedis (GHC10,000) and six thousand Ghana cedis (GHC6,000) to NAB for institutional and program accreditation respectively. It is a financial drain on us if you compare the duplication of services provided to us.

This sentiment was shared by most of the participants from the mentored institutions and it seems to be corroborated by participants from the mentor institutions. A participant from a mentor institution captures it this way:

The mentored institutions complain about funds to pay the affiliation fees; some have written to us to give us payment plans because they have not been able to settle their indebtedness to us quickly but we tell them as long as you have chosen to affiliate with us nothing can be done. Otherwise, you can choose other institutions. So the major challenge has to do with the payment of the affiliation fees. This happens mostly because they are not able to recruit enough students to offset their overheads to leave surplus to pay some of these things.

Another participant from a mentor institution added,

There are some of the institutions that have been hindered mostly by funding and therefore, they are not able to pay for some of the services we render; we want to go there regularly to monitor but if you don't pay the affiliation charges we are limited. We are not able to do that as frequently as often that we want to.

From the participants' quotations, it is evident that in the Ghanaian context, the responsibility for the payment of affiliation cost rests with only the mentored institutions which are different from other higher education contexts. For example, in Papua New Guinea, the affiliation cost is shared between the partner institutions under the policy requirements (Nembou, 2013). The challenge in the Ghanaian situation is that the responsibility for bearing the cost of affiliation does not seem to be based on mutual agreement. The cost is unilaterally determined by the mentor- institutions and NAB without negotiations with mentored institutions. It is therefore not surprising that the mentored institutions complain when they have to bear the cost. It is also plausible to argue that the complaints are based on the institutions' interpretation of value for money. In their view, if what is paid is value for money, it would not be a cause for complaint. For instance, a participant from a mentored institution said:

In terms of real value, I ask myself, what are they giving us apart from holding meetings once a year with us?

Therefore, an argument could be made that the cost of affiliation is arrived at via coercive forces. Interestingly, NAB participants did not perceive any financial burden on the mentored institutions. A participant from NAB indicated:

The fees mentored institutions pay when we conduct institutional audit sometimes do cover the cost we incur of the audit exercise.

It should be noted that the financial burden that the mentored institution complained about was the cumulative effect of fees from NAB and mentor institutions. It is also obvious that the mentored institutions have limited options in terms cost from the available mentor institutions. This suggests that mentored institution bargain from a weak position with respect to the fees charged by the mentor institutions.

Innovation dilemmas of mentored institutions

Another challenge that emerged was innovation dilemmas of mentored institutions. It became apparent that the mentored institutions, which are mostly privately owned and funded, were being made to become same as their mentors, which are state owned and funded, but this seems to create difficulty in innovation at mentored institutions. A participant from a mentored institution puts it this way:

The first thing is the reluctance of the mentor institution to bring change to whatever they are doing but want you to do same. For example, you want to do BSc Environmental Studies and then you do not do things that the mentor institution is doing, then they reject it; so that is a very serious thing. The universities have a long tradition of doing things in a particular way and that they do not give room for the young private institutions to innovate and that is one of the difficulties.

Almost every participant from the mentored institutions expressed same viewpoint but the mentor institutions insist on their traditional requirements. A participant from a mentor institution intimated:

We insist on our requirements: in fact, it is so important to us because at the end of the day, it is our certificate that we give to their students and so we should be sure that they are doing what students we admit into our university will do to earn the degree we have to give.

The remaining participants from the mentor institutions articulated the same point.

The comments from the participants highlight the nuanced difficulties in the public–private orientation of running educational institutions. The mentored institutions are largely private institutions without government funding and therefore gravitate towards entrepreneurial tendencies in running higher education institutions. However, the mentor institutions are mostly public universities with state funding and are mostly conservatives. This appears to be a major challenge to both the mentored and mentor institutions because the mentored institutions want rapid changes to their program offerings to increase enrolment but the mentor institutions seek to enforce their conservative practices and traditions, which seems to slow down such rapid changes (Nembou, 2013). The coercive tendencies championed by the affiliation policy expects private-mentored institutions to behave like the public mentor institutions but the orientation differences bring clashes between the desire to innovation and the quest to maintain traditions. This is why the compulsory nature of the affiliation policy appears problematic.

An over-stretched capacity for mentorship

The findings also reveal a challenge of rising number of institutions to be mentored by limited number of eligible mentor institutions. Participants from both mentor and mentored institutions intimated that the rising number of institutions to be mentored is a challenge to the effective implementation of the affiliation policy. Whereas the mentor institutions are inundated with applications for mentorship putting stress on their staff, the mentored institutions are not enthused about the degree of support they receive from the affiliation relationship due to divided attention of mentor institutions over several mentored institutions:

I think in a lot of ways, there has been divided attention; they slow down the processes because they themselves have their own issues to deal with, and then you are not the only institution mentored and then there is no cut on the number of institutions a mentor can mentor so they can take on as many as they want. University A for example as at now has about 52 program affiliations.

Another participant from a different mentored institution added:

In terms of real value, I ask myself, what are they giving us apart from holding meetings once a year with us? The other aspect is the training programs; For example, as a Registrar, I have attended one on admission, one on certification and one on ceremonies. So in all, these are the areas that consciously they have endeavoured to teach us how to do it. For example, even as an Academic Board, for the appointments and promotions, they should send some of us there to see what they are doing. The second point is the very important role of setting questions, making papers and thesis we need to be properly mentored. You see the external moderation alone, for me it's not sufficient.

Additionally, a participant from a different mentored institution intimated:

They should do more, it shouldn't be seminar for only two or three days, they should also come here to come and see how we do these things, they should visit us more frequently than they have been being doing and interact for example, with the teaching staff.

The work overload on mentor institutions with its associated insufficient attention to mentored institutions was corroborated by participants in the mentor institutions. A participant from a mentor institution puts it this way:

You see, there is no cap on the number of institutions you are allowed to mentor and every day you are inundated with applications for mentorship. There is too much on our hands now; if you do not approve the applications, you hardly have your peace of mind but we are operating beyond our capacity, particularly with the freeze on employing new staff.

Another participant added:

We have the right to reject applications; we have around 40 institutions but so many programs. Some time back, we placed a ban on affiliation because we were stressing ourselves too much. If we stress ourselves, we will be doing them a disservice because the quality we want to assure them may not be achieve.

It is clear from the participants' comments that the number of eligible higher education institutions as mentors within the country is insufficient to meet the demand for mentorship under the affiliation policy because institutions and programs to be mentored keep rising without corresponding increase in eligible institutions to become mentors. This could suggest an over-stretched capacity for mentorship which seems to have slowed the process of building quality assurance capacity of mentored institutions to be autonomous and become eligible as mentors to support the mentorship. But the critical question is 'why do the mentor institutions keep on accepting new institutions for affiliation in the midst of their staffing limitations'? Even though a participant indicated that they do not have peace of mind when they reject mentorship applications, it is also plausible to argue that they find the mentorship as another stream of revenue to support their operations because they have the liberty to fix the affiliation fees without any regulatory requirements imposed on them. It could also be argued that the willingness to accept new applications for mentorship in the midst of over-stretched capacity is to seek dominance in the higher education sector by mentoring many institutions to become like them.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the gap between the policy rhetoric and reality appears to be problematic and have minimised potential achievements of the policy, particularly quality assurance capacity building and innovations to maintain standards and enhanced quality in the mentored institutions. A situation that seems to slow down quality assurance capacity building in the studied mentored-institutions. This requires a rethink of the implementation processes and procedures in order to close the gap between rhetoric and reality in order to maximise benefits of the policy by the relevant stakeholders, especially the mentored institutions.

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