

Unpacking External Quality Audit's Influence on Quality Management Practice of Ghana's Health Training Institutions: A Critical Realist Exploration

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Abstract

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore quality audit reports on Ghanaian Health Training Institutions (HTIs), aiming to understand how external quality audit as a quality assurance mechanism is influential on quality management practices of the HTIs because quality assurance mechanisms are to be a stimulus for innovation and enhancing quality. Utilizing the CDA design, a purposive sampling strategy is employed to select the first cycle external quality audit reports and through data abduction, key themes and linguistic markers are extracted, while data retroduction interprets the findings using Social Reality Theory (SRT) and Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT) lenses. Drawing on SRT, the research unveils power dynamics and discursive patterns that influence the audit process. Additionally, adopting Neo-Institutional Theory, the study reveals the influence of institutional norms and external pressures on quality management practices of the HTIs. The study's implications lie in enhancing the quality audit methodology and quality management practices of the HTIs whilst fostering contextually relevant and effective quality assurance mechanisms of the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC).

Key words: external quality audit, Ghana tertiary education commission, health training institutions, quality assurance, quality management.

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Résumé

Cette étude utilise l'analyse critique du discours (ACD) pour examiner les rapports d'audit de qualité des établissements ghanéens de formation en santé (HTI), dans le but de comprendre comment l'audit externe de qualité, en tant que mécanisme d'assurance qualité, influence les pratiques de gestion de la qualité de ces établissements, sachant que les mécanismes d'assurance qualité sont censés stimuler l'innovation et améliorer la qualité. Dans le cadre de la ACD, une stratégie d'échantillonnage raisonné est utilisée pour sélectionner les rapports d'audit externe de qualité du premier cycle; grâce à l'abduction des données, des thèmes clés et des marqueurs linguistiques sont extraits, tandis que la rétroduction des données permet d'interpréter les résultats à la lumière de la théorie de la réalité sociale (TRS) et de la théorie néo-institutionnelle (TNI). S'appuyant sur la TRS, la recherche met en évidence les dynamiques de pouvoir et les schémas discursifs qui influencent le processus d'audit. Davantage, en s'appuyant sur la théorie néo-institutionnelle, l'étude met en évidence l'influence des normes institutionnelles et des pressions externes sur les pratiques de gestion de la qualité des établissements de formation en santé. Les implications de cette étude résident dans l'amélioration de la méthodologie d'audit de la qualité et des pratiques de gestion de la qualité des établissements de formation en santé, tout en favorisant la mise en place de mécanismes d'assurance qualité efficaces et adaptés au contexte au sein de la Commission ghanéenne de l'enseignement supérieur (CGES).

Mots-clés : établissements de formation en santé du Ghana ; audit externe de la qualité ; commission ghanéenne de l'enseignement supérieur.

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a growing attention on the need for improved quality management practices in tertiary education institutions (TEIs). For example, several studies (Brennan, 2018; Leiber, 2018; Rezeanu, 2011; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018) have highlighted the importance of quality management practices in TEIs. These studies, overall, suggest that effective quality management practices can have a significant influence on tertiary education outcomes. To this end, in many countries, external quality assurance (QA) agencies are paying much attention to quality management practices of TEIs through quality audit exercises (Boughey & McKenna, 2017).

Presently in Ghana, the main external QA agency for tertiary education, Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), has taken its quality audit mechanism to all Health Training Institutions (HTIs) in the country in its quest to ensure effective quality management practices in all tertiary institutions in the nation. Although, jurisdictionally, GTEC is an agency

under the Ministry of Education responsible for tertiary education whilst HTIs are under the Ministry of Health, the Education Regulatory Bodies Act of Ghana (Act 1020) has mandated GTEC to take oversight responsibility for all training institutions providing tertiary level education irrespective of the Ministry they fall under. For the reason of its mandate under Act 1020, GTEC has completed a first cycle of quality audit exercises in HTIs in the country.

During the GTEC's audit exercises in the HTIs, the auditors' reports seem to make several adverse findings on the quality management practices of the HTIs in the areas of governance and administration, academic programmes, learning environment and facilities, and quality enhancement. In effect, the reports indicate observable critical weaknesses in these areas of quality management practices of the HTIs that require immediate attention for improvement interventions as per the recommendations of the audit reports. However, these audit recommendations for improvement in the quality management practices are mainly on mechanistic implementation of coercive isomorphic changes based on hard data from the audit findings. The recommendations are mechanistic and coercive because they are based on responses to checklist of standardised reporting format that leaves little or no room for history and context of individual institutions audited. Mechanistic reporting does not elucidate the contextual elements of individual institutions under auditing to highlight the specific causal mechanisms responsible for the observed quality management practices in the institutions. Meanwhile, studies (Masehela, 2015; Boughey & McKenna, 2017) suggest that quality audit recommendations focused on mechanistic implementation of regulatory mechanisms in TEIs without addressing the causal conditions that foster agency among the institutional actors, do not bring expected improvement in the quality management practices, which create quality tertiary education outcomes.

Currently, there is a paucity of critical analysis of quality auditors' recommendations for implementation in Ghanaian TEIs in general and HTIs in particular, which can stimulate both scholarly and practitioner-based discussions with the potential to make external quality audit more influential on the quality management practices of the TEIs. Meanwhile the effectiveness of quality management systems in TEIs depends on the critical analysis of socio-cultural and agential conditions which enable or constrain quality management practices (Boughey & McKenna, 2017; Browning, 2021). Therefore, this paper focuses on a critical analysis of quality audit reporting and recommendations on quality management practices of HTIs in Ghana as a basis to explain the plausible causal mechanisms that can create effective agency for improving quality management practices of the HTIs. It argues that quality audit report and recommendations require abduction

and retroduction to move from the empirical data to explanations of causal mechanisms occasioning the empirical evidence that inform the audit reports and recommendations. The paper seeks to provide a deeper analysis and interpretations of the audit findings beyond the mechanistic reporting and recommendations, and ignite a discussion on rethinking the current quality audit methodology and how it can be made much more influential on improving quality management practices of TEIs in Ghana. It further argues that for external quality audit to make meaningful influence on institutional quality management practices, it should provide sufficient context analysis and focus on providing support to make compliance a natural occurrence where coercive enforcement becomes redundant.

The paper is informed by Social Reality Theory (SRT) advanced by Archer (1995) and applied by other authors (Boughey & McKenna, 2017; Quinn & Boughey, 2009) to illuminate the realities of quality audit processes in tertiary education. However, SRT is used as an under-labourer to support Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT) as the main theory for explaining the plausible causal mechanisms responsible for the observed audit findings and related recommendations. The paper discusses the theoretical framework first, to elucidate the triad concepts of quality, QA and quality management in TEIs.

The Concept of Quality Management Practices in TEIs

In the realm of tertiary education, quality, QA, and quality management are nested concepts that play crucial roles in ensuring the delivery of effective and fit-for-purpose educational outcomes (Ansaah, 2016). Although quality lacks one universally accepted definition in tertiary education, definitions cluster around what stakeholders want and the desire to make it better (Greere, 2023) which makes quality a dynamic and aspirational concept. Thus, quality in tertiary education represents different things at different times even in the same context which educational systems and institutions are to meet the expectations, needs, and requirements of the stakeholders, including students, faculty, employers, and society at large (Berhane, 2023). It encompasses various aspects, such as the relevance and currency of the curriculum, teaching and learning methodologies, infrastructure, research output, and overall stakeholder satisfaction (Greere, 2023; Mello Silva & Vargas, 2022). In this context, quality is an intrinsic attribute that drives education systems and institutions' reputation, credibility and acceptance (Harvey, 2018).

On the other hand, QA in tertiary education is the mechanisms to guarantee and enact stakeholders negotiated and accepted meaning of quality (Ansaah, 2016). Therefore, QA in tertiary education refers to a systematic process of monitoring and evaluating the performance of tertiary education systems and

institutions to ensure that they meet established quality standards (Asiyai, 2022; Berhane, 2023). QA in tertiary education, therefore, begins from compliance to assurance, to development, to best practice, and to excellence (Greere, 2023). The mechanisms involve both internal and external devices to identify areas of improvement and promote continuous enhancement of institutional practices (Glendinning et al., 2019; Madani, 2019). The external QA mechanisms include quality audits which are conducted by independent agencies to assess an institution's compliance with external standards and guidelines. These audits generate recommendations based on their findings, aimed at fostering improvements and enhancing the overall quality of the institution (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2020).

Regarding quality management, it refers to the proactive and strategic approach adopted by TEIs to pursue best practices and achieve excellence continuously (Brennan, 2018). It involves the establishment of policies, processes, and practices that focus on quality enhancement across all levels of the organization (Brennan, 2018). Quality management practices include setting specific quality objectives, implementing quality control measures, conducting internal evaluations, and ensuring that feedback from various stakeholders is actively incorporated into the decision-making process to deliver to stakeholders' satisfaction (Rezeanu, 2011; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2020).

The relationship among quality, QA and quality management is symbiotic and nested. The quest for quality brings about QA which leads to quality management, and effective quality management practices indicate robust QA system, which in turn, leads to desired quality. In conclusion, the concepts of quality, QA, and quality management are intertwined and nested in the pursuit of excellence in tertiary education. While quality is the ultimate goal that institutions strive to achieve, QA serves as the means to assess adherence to external standards, leading to the generation of recommendations for improvement. However, according to Boughey and McKenna (2017) if these recommendations are mechanistic, but forced into an institution's quality management practices, they may not lead to continuous enhancement and the realization of the institution's mission to provide high-quality education and services to its stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories underpin this study: Social Reality Theory (SRT) and Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT). This section discusses how these two theories inform the study.

Social Reality Theory (SRT) is a variant of Critical Realism (CR) Worldview that takes context and history into account to explain patterns of social phenomena such as the phenomenon of QA in tertiary education and its mechanism of quality audit with associated practices. Readers may consult (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2016) and (Archer & Morgan, 2020) for a comprehensive explanation of CR philosophy and SRT with their underlining concepts. Nonetheless, the paper provides a conceptual explanation of SRT as it guides the argument in discussing quality audit methodology as applied in tertiary education QA.

Tertiary education quality assurance mechanisms usually align with the widely accepted notions of quality in tertiary education as the fitness for and of purpose conception which underpin most of the national QA mechanisms and practices (Berhane, 2023; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). The UK Quality Assurance Agency's framework prioritizes institutional mission alignment (Quality Assurance Agency, 2023); Finnish and Irish agencies participate in mission-driven QA reforms (FINEEC, 2022; Irish Universities Association, 2023); and African agencies increasingly adopt "fitness for purpose" to address massification and resource constraints, as seen in Zimbabwe and Nigeria's pandemic-responsive reforms (Neema-Abooki, 2022).

In this depiction, the paper argues that QA and its mechanisms in tertiary education could be better explained and understood from a SRT perspectives that takes cognizance of context and history to move beyond standardised empirical data to underlying causal conditions for effective social change through human agency (Archer, 2013; Boughey & McKenna, 2017). SRT encourages researchers to explain experienced or observed social phenomenon (for example, quality management practices in TEIs) beyond the empirical evidence to the plausible causal mechanisms responsible for that particular emergent social phenomenon (Archer & Morgan, 2020). Thus, from SRT perspective, the reality of any social phenomenon is layered in history and context, to the extent that the history and the context need to be unpacked to explain the observed and experienced social phenomenon (Archer & Morgan, 2020; Edgley et al., 2016). A focus on only the observable or experiential levels constitutes a 'flat ontology' which is not sufficient to bring about a transformational change in social structure and agency to achieve an expected end (Archer, 2013; Archer & Morgan, 2020).

To this end, using QA mechanisms such as quality audit to bring about improvements in quality management practices of TEIs, the audit methodology must go beyond employing a 'flat ontology' to inform its processes and eventual recommendations for improvement in quality management practices of the institutions and explore the causal

mechanisms (Boughey & McKenna, 2017; Browning, 2021). A more layered approach to reality by unpacking the potential mechanisms responsible for actual events that have resulted in the observable and experiential quality management practices would produce better understanding of the social structures and agency in the institutions for driving improved quality management practices. In this case, SRT seeks to account for how and why quality management practices of the HTIs have changed or remained the same after becoming TEIs within the context of social structure, culture and agency interplays. From SRT standpoint, quality management practices are produced by social structure, culture and agency (Quinn & Boughey, 2009). Thus, it is important for quality audit exercises to probe the institutional structural and cultural conditioning and the agency of staff and students for quality management practices. It is key for quality audit to establish that authentic positive change in structure, culture and human agency would emerge to improve quality management practices as a result of the audit findings and recommendations.

Relatedly, SRT expects quality audit reports to provide explanation to structural and cultural mechanisms at the macro (national) and micro (institutional) levels that are responsible for the empirical evidence of quality management practices observed by the audit panel members to inform their findings and recommendations. The interrogation and explanation of the causal mechanisms would provide a better understanding to tackle the root causes of any weakness in the quality management practices and generate human agency for authentic structural and cultural change to occur for improved quality management practices. In this vein, the study draws on the SRT to abduct the audit report to understand the structural and cultural conditioning and the human agency present in the HTIs at the time of the audit exercises. The paper seeks to understand the existing structural and cultural conditions for quality management practices in the HTIs and the human agency for implementing the recommended changes in the audit report.

Despite the usefulness of SRT to illuminate the understanding of social phenomenon, it might not have the explanatory power for all the specific causal mechanisms of events resulting in the observed and experienced in social science investigations. For instance, Vincent and O'Mahoney (2016) contend that at the point of empirical data retrodution in their critical reality study of a strategic partnership between one public and one private organisations, adding existing theories become invaluable for deeper understanding of mechanisms observed. SRT offers the opportunity to understand more about the relationships between the mechanisms and

the context, but other theories are required to build better explanations for interconnections among the mechanisms (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2016).

Thus, for better explanations of the causal mechanisms responsible for the existing structural and cultural conditioning and the human agency captured in the quality audit reports on the HTIs, a Neo Institutional Theory (NIT) is added to the explanatory tool mix through retroduction of the audit findings and recommendations. The NIT has long been used in tertiary education organisational research due to its explanatory power linked to rationalisation of structures in society including TEIs (Klassen & Sá, 2020). Practices of TEIs have become highly institutionalised within appropriately established structures for responsibility, rationality and modernity as desirable traits for legitimacy in the society (Klassen & Sá, 2020). In this depiction, NIT comes in handy as a tool to explain the plausible sources of the prevailing structural and cultural conditioning as well as the human agency for the quality management practices in the HTIs. This is because NIT is built on the concept of isomorphism which involves cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative mechanisms for explaining procedures and practices in TEIs including quality management practices (Klassen & Sá, 2020; Zapp et al., 2021). The NIT concept of isomorphism explains the bases of order, motives of compliance, logics of action, mechanisms and indicators employed by organisations including TEIs (Klassen & Sá, 2020; Seyfried et al., 2019).

The cultural-cognitive isomorphism also known as mimetic isomorphism manifests through mimesis and emulation of practices for legitimacy (Gulden et al., 2020; Zapp et al., 2021). This isomorphism component of NIT argues that institutions in their formative and less stable phases gravitate towards copying the practices of well-established institutions within the same sector or across different sectors in order to gain legitimacy (David et al., 2019; Zapp et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the mimesis of practices represents shared mental conception of social reality that shape meaning and interpretation of events which affect actions and choices (Klassen & Sá, 2020). The mimetic isomorphism pillar of NIT could explain the cultural conditioning of quality management practices of TEIs.

Also, NIT's normative dimension of isomorphism is based on moral motivation to behave appropriately as professionals and experts for social obligation (Klassen & Sá, 2020). As professionals are socialised to act in certain ways, they come under pressure to internalise others' expectations of them and adhere to particular set of behaviours and roles (Klassen & Sá, 2020; Zajda, 2020). The normative isomorphism helps to explain the nature of human agency within the institution to act on quality audit findings and recommendations.

Additionally, NIT uses its regulative or coercive isomorphism to offer explanation for why institutions take certain actions to avoid costly or embarrassing consequences because the regulative isomorphism captures pressures that come from legal frameworks (Klassen & Sá, 2020; Zapp et al., 2021). The regulative isomorphism is a useful analytical tool for explaining the structural conditioning of quality management practices of TEIs in that they operate under legal frameworks and financial conditionalities requiring them to set up certain institutional structures for their operations.

Having explained and justified the theoretical framework for the study, the context of GTEC's quality audit mechanism and a brief description of the audit methodology in use is provided next.

The Context of GTEC's Quality Audit for TEIs in Ghana

The Ghanaian tertiary education landscape is governed by GTEC at the national level, which plays a pivotal role in ensuring the quality and standards of tertiary institutions in the country. GTEC employs QA mechanisms including quality audit to ensure that TEIs provide high-quality education, meet international standards, and contribute effectively to national development. In this context analysis, the article examines the role and significance of the quality audit conducted by GTEC on Ghanaian TEIs, with a focus on the audit methodology and its potential influence on the quality management practices of tertiary institutions, particularly the HTIs.

The main goal of the GTEC-conducted quality audit is to review and appraise the TEIs' quality management practices in order to raise standards (Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, 2023). The audit is designed to look at a number of issues, such as institutional governance, academic programmes, faculty credentials, learning environments and infrastructure, research output, student support services, and quality enhancement mechanisms (Ansaah & Swanzey, 2019). The GTEC aims to foster ongoing improvement and enhancement of educational quality by identifying areas of strength and weakness within the institution's quality management practices through this thorough evaluation (Ansaah & Swanzey, 2019).

To accomplish this, the quality audit process entails a methodical and thorough evaluation of institutions using a combination of document analysis, on-site visits, and stakeholder involvement. To obtain insight into the institutions' quality management processes, GTEC Audit Teams examine institutional policies, strategic plans, academic programmes, learning environments and facilities, and quality enhancement mechanisms throughout the document analysis phase. The Auditors have the chance to speak with faculty, staff, students, and administrators during on-site

inspections to develop a more comprehensive picture of the institution's operations and culture. Through stakeholder engagement, the Auditors are able to get opinions and feedback from internal stakeholders, primarily key officers, faculty, and students, ensuring a thorough assessment of the institutions' adherence to standards and practices for quality enhancement as well as agency for ongoing improvement.

The GTEC quality audit has important ramifications for Ghanaian TEIs as a result. Corrective action plans may be created as a result of the audit results; these plans may call for implementing interventions to remedy inadequacies, addressing improvements, or even facing potential sanctions. The audit process pushes institutions to adopt best practices, comply with international quality standards, and show dedication to ongoing improvement, all of which help to promote the tertiary education industry in Ghana as a whole.

Overall, GTEC's quality audit is an essential tool for guaranteeing and upgrading the standard of education offered by Ghanaian TEIs. The auditing process fosters openness, responsibility, and ongoing development by assessing many facets of institutional operation. The audit's conclusions have wide-ranging effects on the institutions and the tertiary education industry as a whole, encouraging an atmosphere that is conducive to excellence, innovation, and relevance in Ghanaian tertiary education.

Study Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, to explore the quality audit reports. CDA is "a particular strand of discourse analysis that focuses on the role of language in society and in political processes, traditionally targeting texts produced by elites and powerful institutions, such as news and political speeches" (Bouvier & Machin, 2020, p. 2). It is qualitative research strategy that "focuses on power and ideology in discourse, and insists that research needs to take the material and social reality outside of discourse into account in order to make meaningful claims about society and culture" (Hjelm, 2021, p. 13). As a research approach, CDA provides a comprehensive framework for examining language use and communication patterns in texts, enabling researchers to delve into the underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and social structures that shape discourse (Bouvier & Machin, 2020; Hjelm, 2021).

CDA was adopted as an appropriate method for analysing the data from quality audit reports in Ghanaian HTIs because when applied to quality audit reports, CDA allows researchers to explore the implicit meanings,

biases, and the influence of powerful actors, shedding light on how quality management practices are represented and constructed in these reports. In quality audit reports, language plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of educational quality. CDA helps to unveil power relations by closely analysing the linguistic choices made by auditors and accrediting bodies in their assessments during audit exercises. By identifying the use of evaluative language and authoritative voice, researchers can uncover how certain actors exercise their authority and influence over the auditing process (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; De Bernardi, 2021). This critical scrutiny of power dynamics enables a deeper understanding of whose interests and perspectives are prioritized, and whose voices may be marginalized within the discourse on quality management practices in the HTIs.

Further, CDA is instrumental in identifying dominant discourses present in the audit reports which can reflect broader societal ideologies and norms that may influence the assessment criteria and standards used in the audit process (Bouvier & Machin, 2020; De Bernardi, 2021). Researchers employing CDA can analyse how these dominant discourses shape the portrayal of quality, shedding light on whether the reports are contextually relevant by considering the unique cultural and contextual aspects of Ghanaian tertiary institutions.

Moreover, CDA allows for the exploration of gaps and silences in the audit reports. Researchers can uncover what is omitted or left unsaid, which may indicate deliberate exclusions or areas that lack proper attention (Bouvier & Machin, 2020). These omissions may reveal the interests and priorities of the auditing bodies and provide insights into potential biases or limitations in the reporting process.

Report Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy is employed to select the first full audit cycle reports on all the HTIs that participated in the audit exercises. The HTIs have different profiles regarding ownership types, geographical locations, and academic programme levels. However, none of them offer degree programmes yet. They offer three-year diplomas together with professional licensure certificates to practices as State Registered Nurses or Midwives.

A total of 134 HTIs, made up of 86 public and 48 private, were audited during the first full audit cycle across the 16 political regions of the country. This first cycle audits were conducted between January 2019 and December 2022. The study focused on the first cycle audit because the full reports on all the HTIs that participated were obtainable from GTEC upon request for

research purposes. Besides, only one cycle of quality audit reports had been completed for the HTIs at the time of this study.

Data Extraction

The data extraction strategy began with a Codebook development (Ritchie et al., 2022) which enabled to outline the key concepts such as structural and cultural preconditions to explore from the authors' theoretical orientation for the study. For example, under SRT, the concepts of structural and cultural preconditions at the macro (national) and micro (institutional) levels to code the reports were used. Under NIT, pressures from mimesis and emulation of practices for legitimacy, moral motivation to behave appropriately as professionals and experts as social obligation, and legal frameworks were coded.

The data extraction process started June 2023 by reading through the audit reports thoroughly to familiarize with the content and structure (Saldaña, 2021). Using the codebook as a guide, relevant sections, paragraphs, or quotes that reflect the concepts outlined in the codebook were sought. Then, the narratives and data points that best represent the theoretical constructs labelled in the codebook were extracted. For example, explicit mentions of demands for policies and procedures by regulatory GTEC were extracted because they represented pressure from external regulatory framework. Finally, the extracted data in a structured manner were organized, linking each narrative or data point to its respective theoretical construct in the codebook.

Data Analysis

Once the data extraction was complete, its analysis using abduction and retroduction techniques followed (De Bernardi, 2021). The data abduction process involved systematically analysing the content of the reports to identify recurring themes, linguistic markers, and discursive patterns related to the constructs in the codebook. With the linguistic markers, instances of evaluative language and authoritative voices in the reports were themed whilst the discursive patterns themed instances of ideological expressions in the reports (Hjelm, 2021).

The data retroduction in the analysis followed, moving from what is empirically observable to structural and cultural conditions at the macro and micro levels that are not immediately observable in the audit reports (De Bernardi, 2021) using the lenses of SRT and NIT. By applying these critical lenses, the study sought to unveil the underlying structures, discourses, power relations, and institutional norms that shape quality management practices captured in the audit reports.

Ethical Considerations

The study observes sound research ethics in using the audit reports and addressed several ethical issues associated with the use of institutional information. First, an application was submitted and permission granted from GTEC in April 2023 to use the reports for scholarly argument and contribute to knowledge on QA practices in tertiary education. Second, confidentiality and anonymity ethical principle in research were observed by ensuring that any information obtained from the quality audit reports is presented in a way that maintains the confidentiality and anonymity of the health training institutions, faculty, students, and any other stakeholders involved. Finally, data integrity and accuracy were observed by ensuring that the information taken from the audit reports is accurately represented without misrepresenting or manipulating data. Direct quotes, data excerpts, and statistics have been contextualized and presented responsibly.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, emerging issues from the external quality audit reports and their recommendations are presented. By employing SRT and NIT, the study aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of how influential GTEC's quality audit exercises are on quality management practices of HTIs in Ghana. The findings and discussions are presented under four major themes that emerged from the coding and analysis of the audit reports. These themes are: Governance and Administration, Academic Programmes, Learning Environment and Facilities, and Quality Enhancement. Findings under these themes are presented and discussed in this section.

Discourse on Governance and Administration

The governance system, which is represented by the decision-making structures of the HTIs, consists mainly of the Governing Board (also known as the Advisory Board) and the Academic Board as identified in the audit reports. One of the major findings in the audit reports on governance was that the Governing Boards and the Academic Boards of the HTIs were not consistent and well-structured with respect to GTEC's published norms and standards for tertiary institutions in terms of compositions of the boards. This is captured in the sampled reports as:

The Advisory Boards' composition was not consistent and well-structured. The composition should include representations of people with technical competence, gender equity, students, and mentoring institutions. ... Unfortunately, also, an examination of the Academic Board reveals that in most of the institutions, key officers including the Quality Assurance Officer, Librarian, College Administrator, and Dean of Students were not members.

The Academic Board's membership should be enlarged to include critical officers such as a Quality Assurance Officer, a Librarian, a College Administrator, and a Dean of Students.

The quotation on the governance structures suggests a narrative of deviations from established norms by the GTEC or best practice benchmarks. However, the basis for such mass deviation from the norms are not captured in the reports, meanwhile a recommendation was made for the governing boards and academic boards to be well constituted and structured. From the standpoint of critical realists, the findings on the governance structures do not address the issue beyond the empirical level and examine the causal mechanisms responsible for the manifest mass deviation from the norms. In the view of SRT as articulated by Quinn and Boughey (2009), the findings and recommendations of the governance structures of the HTIs indicate a situation of using “flat ontology” in audit methodology that usually does not address actual causes of issues in audit findings. It has been argued that it is not good enough if auditors do not present causal conditions but focus on only the observable or experienced during audit exercises (Bunt, 2018). Nonetheless, it is discernible from the discourse of the quotations on the governance structures that macro level causal mechanisms are responsible for the governance system observed by the auditors because almost all the HTIs manifested the same governance conditions. In such a situation, the recommendations offered in the audit reports for the HTIs to be ordered to restructure their governance system appear to be an application of coercive isomorphic device for activating a regulatory power to ensure compliance with established norms of tertiary education institutional governance structures (David et al., 2019; Loi et al., 2021). In such a context, the coercive isomorphic device would probably achieve the intended purpose only for want of institutional legitimacy requirement irrespective of the root causes of the existing governance structures.

Regarding the administrative systems, which are usually depicted by the institutional organograms that define the administrative arrangements for implementing statutes, policies and governance decisions, the audit reports indicate that they were poorly designed and implemented in the HTIs. The audit reports put it this way:

The Organograms that implement the Statutes are poorly unconventional practices required of modern TEIs that demands immediate corrective actions designed and implemented. There are several conflicts between the Statutes and the Organograms. Certain positions created in some of the Organograms are not found in the Statutes, and vice versa. Some positions, such as

the Vice Principal and Internal Auditors, do not have suitable reporting lines or placement. GTEC has developed a simplified Organogram for private tertiary education institutions in Ghana. HTIs could use the GTEC template to create an institutional organogram.

Again, the discourse in the audit reports on the administrative structures predicated on the Organograms and the Statutes, lacks adequate interrogation on the causal mechanisms of the observed inadequacies found in the Organograms and the Statutes' implementation. It is not clear from the discourse, how the inharmonious relationship between the Organograms and Statutes emerged and the likely causative factors. Meanwhile, recommendation is made for the adoption of an Organogram template GTEC developed for private TEIs. Thus, this audit recommendation on Organograms presents a vivid case of pressures from mimesis and emulations of practices for legitimacy. Although, the recommendation to adopt the organogram template GTEC developed for private TEIs is a proposal without seeking compliance, however, due to power dynamics, the HTIs might feel obliged to adopt the recommended organogram to gain acceptance even if it might not have any consequential improvement to their quality management practices. Besides, the linguistic marker of the language, “the HTIs could use the GTEC template” connotes an impression of alluding to what is implicitly acceptable to the regulatory authority so that adopting it has legitimacy.

Discourse on Academic Programmes

The discourse on Academic Programmes focuses on student admissions, assessment, and staff-student ratios. The discourse indicates unconventional practices required of modern TEIs that demand immediate corrective actions. The reports proceed to make what is deemed as appropriate recommendations for implementation. Meanwhile, the discourse is silent on the causal mechanisms responsible for the unconventional practices. For instance, on student admissions, the reports collectively state:

There is no Admissions Committee in place, and most admissions are handled by the College Principal. Mentoring institutions are not involved in all aspects of the admissions process. The admission processes of HTIs should be streamlined by putting in place properly constituted admission committees. Mentoring institutions should be included on the admissions committee.

Evidently, the discourse does not provide any context why admissions committees are absent and the College Principal solely handles admissions. As reasonable as the recommendations appear with common practices of modern TEIs, the silences on contexts constrain a holistic view of the issue to enable the GTEC Board decide on keeping to the rule or make an exception if what is practiced works for the HTIs. In this situation, GTEC enforcement of the recommendations as they are, might address only the empirical layer of reality leaving the actual and real layers of reality (De Bernardi, 2021) which address the root causes of the issue for real influence on admission practices.

On student assessment, the nature of the discourse is not different in terms of absence of context and information beyond the empirical level. The findings and the recommendations state:

There are no assigned External Examiners/Moderators for the institutions, and even when they are, moderators delay in submitting their reports while others do not. A concerning observation is that some moderators have never visited their respective institutions after their appointments. In the majority of HTIs, examination leakages are also common.

External moderation procedures must be adequately strengthened. As part of the affiliation agreement, the mentoring institutions should appoint external moderators to the HTIs. The moderators should agree on a visit schedule with the institution, as well as submit feedback and reports to the HTIs.

The discourse on the assessment or examinations is obviously silent on causal conditions of the state of affairs. Meanwhile, the assessment of external examination and moderation procedures within the HTIs reveals a critical deficiency in the quality control mechanisms beyond the HTIs. This situation exposes a structural issue in the absence of oversight responsibility over the External Examiners/Moderators, leading to delays in report submissions and, in some cases, complete negligence of their roles. It is imperative that the mentoring institutions play a more active oversight role over external moderators, ensuring regular visits, and fostering accountability to maintain the quality of education and the integrity of assessments in HTIs.

The discourse on academic programmes also highlights observed deficiencies in staff-student-ratios with a potential compromise on quality. The reports collectively states:

The Staff Student Ratio (SSR) was found to be too high, particularly for midwifery programmes, hovering at 1:70 for some institutions. Such a high SSR has a direct influence on the quality of teaching and learning. In order to address the high SSR, the Ministry of Health should consult with the Ministry of Finance for financial authorization to hire the necessary employees, particularly for the Midwifery programmes. The recruitment of crucial employees like Librarians and Internal Auditors should also demand the Hon. Minister's attention. It is advisable to replace incompetent departmental heads with qualified cognate staff.

The high Staff-Student Ratio (SSR) highlighted in the discourse poses a significant structural challenge to the quality of teaching and learning in the HTIs. This situation results from both resource limitations and potentially misaligned organizational structures. In this particular instance, the reports point to a national level causal condition of the Government's inability to provide funds for hiring additional staff and the HTIs' misaligned organisational structures. Thus, the recommendations assign responsibilities to specific actors to take action. From an SRT standpoint, such interrogation of causal conditions generates better human agency for transformative action (Archer & Morgan, 2020).

Discourse on Learning Environment and Facilities

The discourse on learning environment and facilities captured in the reports indicate a state of concern for compromise on quality with regards to developing the student nurses and midwives' practical competence. The report captures the discourse as such:

Physical facilities are required to support the proper operation of the HTIs' programmes for the development of practical competence. The majority of the supporting facilities are either inadequate or in disrepair. A few examples are provided below:

- Most HTIs do not have internet access. Even where it is available, coverage is limited to a few locations.
- Skill laboratories are under-equipped.
- Inadequate computers in computer labs.
- Libraries are ill-equipped and badly managed. There is no library management software in place, and no e-books/journals are subscribed to.

The government, through the GETFund, should devise a strategy to retool and equip all HTIs with the necessary cutting-edge technology to support their programmes and practical work. HTIs should also have reliable internet access, appropriate PCs, and library management software/e-library.

The state of affairs described in the discourse as inadequate facilities and resources could be attributable to a combination of structural and cultural conditions that have evolved over time. Financial constraints appear the obvious critical factor because Ghana's TEIs have long struggled with limited budgets, and often receive insufficient funding, leading to the inability to maintain and upgrade facilities (Kwasi-Agyeman et al., 2020). In another vein, there might be institutional culture of resistance to change and a preference for maintaining the status quo by the HTIs with little institutional level initiatives, reinforced by a lack of effective external oversight to keep learning environment and facilities up-to-date.

Admittedly, the reports use the recommendations to draw attention to the government's limited funding as a possible causal condition for the state of affairs observed but silent on plausible institutional level culture of resistance to change and keeping to the status quo. From a critical realist standpoint, the recommendations may address symptoms instead of actual causes because the main causal condition could be the culture of maintaining the status quo instead of institutional level initiatives to transform the learning environment and facilities (Masehela, 2015).

Discourse on Quality Enhancement

The discourse on quality enhancement presented in the reports show concern for quality enhancement systems and practices in the HTIs as stated in the extract below.

The quality assurance (QA) unit needs adequate funding, and personnel with the right qualifications should be chosen to lead it. The QA officers should receive a job description to enable them discharge their duties diligently. To establish a quality enhancement culture in the HTIs, the QA officers should first have a quality assurance policy and annual plans. It is advised that the QA officers receive training on the underlisted:

- Preparation of QA Policy
- Preparation of QA Plan
- Development of tools and checklists for monitoring performance on academic standards

- Formulation of Strategic Plans

The Commission might also assist the HTIs by creating relevant templates and guidelines for writing policy texts.

This extract from the reports on quality enhancement underscores critical issues in the realm of quality enhancement within the HTIs. However, as usual, the discourse does not interrogate the causal mechanisms either at the institutional or national level responsible for the deficiencies observed. Thus, the recommendations may not address the root causes of the issues.

Concluding Thoughts

The findings from this study provoke a rethink of the current GTEC's quality audit methodology intended to strengthen quality management practices of the HTIs, particularly the reporting format. The findings demonstrate the inadequacy of the quality audit reports that inform GTEC to deploy its regulatory authority to enforce compliance on standards regarding quality management practices of the HTIs. From the standpoint of SRT and NIT, it is evident from the analyses and discussions of the quality audit reports that GTEC's audit methodology is based on 'flat ontology' which does not go beyond the empirical layer of reality to explain the structural and socio-cultural conditions responsible for audit observations on quality management practices of the HTIs. The reports also lack evocative discourses to get the sense of internal actors' narratives informing Auditors' claims during live audit exercise. If the audit observations appear mechanical and do not explain the causal conditions surrounding the findings with evocative narratives of actors in the institution, it is plausible that GTEC's action on the reports would be less influential as expected because the socio-cultural context is missing in the report. Thus, the quality audit mechanism would have minimal potential to bring authentic quality improvement culture in the HTIs beyond the usual compliance mode of quality management practices to appease regulatory demands.

For GTEC's quality audit mechanism to be more influential on quality management practices of the HTIs, audit reports should include evocative discourses from the participants of the auditee institution highlighting explanations for causal conditions responsible for observed quality management practices in the institutions. This calls for a review of the current quality audit reporting format to compel auditors to highlight causal conditions of quality management practices with evocative writing so that institutions involved can vividly relate to the report to generate human agency and natural responsibility for improvement actions in quality management practices in the institution.

Limitations of the Study

In order to comprehend the underlying causes of the observed quality management practices, the study provides a thorough analysis of quality audit reports on the HTIs in Ghana. There are a few restrictions, though, that must be noted. First, questions concerning the accuracy and objectivity of the data may arise given that the study's main source of data was quality audit reports. Due to their inherent selectiveness, audit reports might not fully account for all internal and external factors influencing the activities that were observed. Furthermore, the study's qualitative methodology, that is, Critical Discourse Analysis, may include subjectivity in interpretation, thereby restricting the generalizability of findings, even though it is helpful in revealing power dynamics and latent meanings.

Second, the results may not be as applicable to other kinds of educational institutions due to the study's narrow focus on a certain segment of Ghanaian tertiary education (HTIs). It's possible that the special traits and difficulties faced by HTIs do not accurately reflect Ghana's larger higher education sector. Moreover, the focus of the study is limited to Ghana, which begs the question of how generalizable the results are to other institutional and sociocultural contexts. It is possible that the dynamics of quality management in HTIs are different from those in other nations or in other fields of education. As a result, the study's conclusions should be evaluated in light of Ghanaian HTIs, and care should be used when using them in other contexts.

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