Delivering higher education to meet local needs in a developing context: the quality dilemmas?

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Abstract

Purpose – Higher education is increasingly being scrutinised and discourse centred on its usefulness to stakeholders. In 1992, the University for Development Studies (UDS) was established in Northern Ghana with a mission to engage with local communities to develop the area. This paper aims to understand the quality perspective of the university within the contexts of the needs of its catchment community and quality requirements of other stakeholders guided by issues arising from the questions of who really should define quality, in what context, for whose benefit, and with whose resources.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper takes a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, documentary and artefacts to generate data from the UDS.

Findings – Although donors play a crucial role in ensuring quality, the findings suggest that the basis for any effective quality should move beyond the traditional precepts to make it reflect local needs and realities within an international context guided by effective quality monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Practical implications – The paper provides practical suggestions of appropriate quality assurance models for higher education institutions in the developing world.

Originality/value – The paper identifies some quality dilemmas in higher education in developing contexts.

Keywords Higher education, Quality assurance, Universities, Ghana, Developing countries

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The context in which public higher education institutions operate has had profound changes over the last two decades: increasing demand for higher education, technological advancement, evolving knowledge economy, and pressure on institutions to respond to the needs and aspiration of stakeholders among other things (Blackmore, 2009; Ward, 2003). These changes are acknowledged to present major challenges to higher education as a whole and have led some universities, particularly those in the more developed countries, to transform (Abukari, 2010; Jarvis, 2001). Correspondingly, quality of some institutions’ policies and practices on teaching, research and community engagement are increasingly being explicitly based on the extent to which core activities generate income and strengthen national economic competitiveness. To ensure that higher education tailor its activities towards national needs in order to justify state funds spend on them, effective national strategic provisions such as the quality assessment exercise (QAE) and the research excellence framework (REF) in the UK are established in many countries.

However, despite facing similar global pressure, higher education in the developing world is not proactive enough to meet these challenges for a variety of reasons (Tilak,
2. Methodology

The research was carried out between 2004 and 2008 and was designed as a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews (20 academics and academic registrars were interviewed from UDS); documentary sources (relevant international and national (Ghana) policy documents, and publications, reports and newsletters from UDS); and artefacts (e.g. UDS’s infrastructure, equipment, laboratory) to generate data. These methods were ideal and important to obtain very rich data to understand the quality dimension. A purposive sampling method was used to identify subjects for interviews across four academic blocks (faculty/school) of the university. Data analysis and interpretation was done using the Interactive Model of Qualitative Data Analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This involves a mutual interaction between all activities of the research (data collection, data reduction, data display, data reading and data verification and interpretation), an interactive, cyclical process. The data analysis was
based on evolved mutually inclusive themes: context, mission, teaching and learning, research activity, community engagement activities, resources, sources of funding, results and evaluation. These themes were analysed with the aim of understanding the quality assurance strategies within each and how each directly and indirectly designed to assure quality for the entire model of higher education.

3. Context of university for development studies
Ghana is a developing country and a former British colony with an estimated population of 18,412,247 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2003) located in West Africa. Ghana is “traditionally” divided into two contrasting geographical regions; southern and northern sectors (Dickson, 1968) which has a colonial route. Presently, Ghana has ten administrative regions, out of these; Northern Ghana consists of three regions namely: Northern, Upper East and Upper West (sometimes the Brong Ahafo region is included). This area is almost half of the land area, yet only 18.1 percent of the population of Ghana live there (Ghana Statistical Service, 2003). The population of the area is estimated at 3,346,110, with the Northern, Upper East and Upper West having 1,854,994; 917,251 and 573,860 respectively. The area is defined within the Northern Savannah Ecological zone that has the characteristics of low annual rainfall (below 110 cm), one rainy season lasting for an average of three months.

The major economic activity in Northern Ghana is subsistence agriculture, practiced by over 60 percent of the population and usually involving food crops, animal and poultry rearing. Although the formal and service sectors are said to be developing fast, they make up an insignificant proportion of economic activity. The dependency ratio is the highest in the country. According to a report by Gyimah-Boadi and Asante (2003) for the Commission on Human Rights, the three Northern savannah regions have the worst poverty levels in Ghana. It states that nine out of ten people in Upper East are poor, eight out of ten in Upper West and seven out of ten in the Northern Region. On the average, 80.3 percent of people in the three regions are considered poor; Upper East has the highest of 88 percent, Upper West 84 percent and Northern 69 percent (Ghana Statistical Service, 2003). This situation has been attributed by many to several factors including the lack of natural resources of economic value such as mineral resources (gold, diamonds), rich agricultural land area to support cash crops production. The late introduction of formal education into the area by European colonisers is also cited. However, it has been suggested that it is not only with the lack of political will but strategic and viable policies implemented by the post-colonial state (Dickson, 1968). A major characteristic of the area is the presence of both local and international non-governmental organisations.

Participation rate in higher education in Ghana is lower than many countries in West Africa; reports indicate that participation of people aged between 18 and 21 years is as low as 2.5 percent. According to National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE) statistics, between 1990/1997 and 2000/2001 an average of 32.3 percent of the total qualified applicants were admitted into universities (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2001). The Education for All (EFA) Global Report 2007 statistics indicate that a total of 70,000 students are currently enrolled in tertiary education of which 22,000 are females and 48,000 males (UNESCO, 2006). However, the rate of participation in Northern Ghana is the lowest in the country. Despite significant successes achieved towards empowering females to participate effectively in all areas
of the development process of the area, women in northern Ghana are still to a greater extent in subordinate positions when it comes to education, degree of participation in governance and the economy, especially in the rural areas (see also Morley and Lugg, 2008).

4. The quality question
The genesis of the concept of quality is industry often related to organisational process, improvement and the expectation of the market. The introduction of the concept into higher education and its subsequent contestation among practitioners and researchers makes it more complicated. Unlike industry, higher education is a professional organisation not a firm, its process is more complex (Vroeijenstijn, 2003). Quality is an elusive concept, which assumes different meanings in different contexts and can be controversial sometimes. In many cases multifaceted terms such as effectiveness, efficiency and/or equity are used as synonyms of or to expound on its meaning. Similarly, variations exist in the framework used to define and analyse quality; for example this could be based on process and outcome (usually teaching-learning and students' assessment outcomes); stakeholder perspective; status of accreditation/ recognition (usually by a recognised body); inherited legacy; matching international set standards, etc. According to Sallis (2002, p. 11), “every one is in favour of providing quality education, the arguments start when we attempt to define what quality means”. Hence, it is based on this assumption that it has become pertinent to research to understand the question of what quality is appropriate, and in what context. In the field of education, the concept of quality is usually broadly defined based on four broad dimensions: environment, content, process and outcomes (UNICEF, 2000). Sallis (2002) suggests two aspects: “procedural concept of quality” (proving – fitness for purpose) and “transformation quality” (improving – continuous improvement and organisation). Most of the different views and dimensions of quality in higher education could be summarised as – a degree to which the best is got from higher education within a given context (local, national, regional, international) taking cognisance of the objective, process and outcome. In view of the multifaceted nature of the concept, the discussion here is not to define quality per se, but to discuss the rationales for quality in higher education within the developing context and the dynamics emanating from its relationship with important stakeholders; following the argument that national and local educational contexts should be taken into consideration when defining educational quality (Adams, 1993). Hence, the quality dimension here is that the paper will critically reflect on the broad aim (mission) of the University, its core activities and the extent to which these activities are helping to achieve the broad aim.

4.1 Quality benchmark for a developmental university
The idea of using higher education as an engine for development is not new; it was a feature in the 1880s in Japan, demonstrated in the instrument establishing the first national university (Coleman, 1984). The American Land Grant Colleges in the nineteenth century set up colleges to specifically serve as an instrument to solve problems confronting the American society (Key, 1996; Veysey, 1965); post independent higher education strategies in most colonised states particularly African countries were developmental oriented more as rhetoric than reality.
In all these strategies, the quality dimension was centred on the extent to which teaching, research and other core university/college activities responded and met the needs of the community. According to Coleman (1984, p. 85) the developmental university is an “institution that in all its aspects is singularly animated and concerned, rhetorically and practically, with the ‘solution’ of the concrete problems of societal development”. It is argued that the developmental university should have three main functions: teaching, research and service (Coleman, 1984; Ajayi et al., 1996; Effah and Mensah-Bonsu, 2001); teaching should be more innovative geared towards making the overall learning experience relevant to the local culture and practical problems of society. Research should generally be applied and project based to also reflect the developmental needs of the given society:

Research priority should be given to such topics as rural health, the problems of poverty in its varying contexts, the conflicts of cultures in multi-ethnic societies and the basis for unity and agricultural and rural development (Lauglo, 1984, p. 77).

Coleman has identified four principal themes often associated with different views of development as:

1. An ethnocentric notion synonymous with “westernisation”.
2. Economistic notion as “economic growth”.
3. As the “measurably amelioration of poverty, unemployment, and inequality under the rubric of ‘the realisation of human personality’”.
4. As a structural transformation from “interdependence based on hierarchy” to “interdependence based on symmetry and mutual accountability”.

The concept of the developmental university in this study is tied loosely to those of (3) and (4), more particularly related to developing countries, which Amartya Sen conceptualises as the removal of main sources of poverty and socio-economic deprivation, also refers to as unfreedom (Sen, 1999). However, it may be important to acknowledge that despite the intellectual efforts to understand the dimension of development especially on how education can effect the desired change, there are still wide variations in scholars’ understanding of what constitutes development (Fagerlind and Saha, 1989).

Based on this premise, quality should be viewed both as content, process and outcome; this means that the quality dimension should be based on the extent to which university policy and strategy, teaching syllabus/content and teaching methods and strategies; research areas, approaches and methods; and service activities and community relationship reflects the needs of the given community. More importantly how this policies and practices result in a practical resolution of issues and needs of the society as well as place the society in a position to relate and adapt practically to changing circumstances both in the local and international context. This will then require appropriate assessment and evaluation tools to monitor and direct activities to achieve required objectives.

4.2 UDS perspective of quality

Quality assurance in Ghanaian higher education was established in 1993 initially for polytechnics and private higher education institutions and by 2005 it extended to include all public universities. The National Council for Tertiary Education (NCTE)
and the National Accreditation Board (NAB) have the responsibility of supervising and delivering quality higher education through peer reviews, visits to institutions, review reports of institutional self-assessments; specific important areas of attention are quality of programmes, numbers and quality of staff, physical facilities such as libraries, laboratories and lecture rooms (Effah and Mensah-Bonsu, 2001; Government of Ghana, 2002; Materu, 2007). The quality perspective of the government of Ghana can be seen from a government review report on higher education entitled: “Meeting the challenges of education in the twenty first century”. The review report views quality assurance as the “internal and external control, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms put in place to ensure that the education offered is kept at high standards”; it stressed:

[Tertiary education] has a key role to play in the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge, production of human capital as well as the development of skills and adaptation of knowledge to meet developmental needs (Government of Ghana, 2002, p. 131).

In a broader sense this means that quality of higher education in Ghana would be determined based on the extent to which the above broad aims are met. However, to what extent are these processes and indicators effectively carried out, monitored and evaluated to achieve desired results? This and other related questions may need further scrutiny to conclude.

4.2.1 Mission. The quality perspective and practice of the University for Development Studies emanate from the national quality framework and the Law that established it. The broad quality perspective of the University, it is argued, is firmly based on the legal instrument that established it (Government of Ghana, 2002). The Ghanaian government official policy states that the mission of the University for Development Studies is to:

Blend the academic world with that of the community in order to provide constructive interaction between the two for the total development of Northern Ghana, in particular, and the country as a whole (Government of Ghana, 1992).

The UDS has a vision:

... to be the home of world-class pro-poor scholarship ... to ensure that there is intellectual and pragmatic input into the development process of the poor, disadvantage and marginalised areas (University for Development Studies, 2003, p. 2).

Based on this vision, its mission is to promote equity and transform deprived communities through practically oriented, community-based, problem-solving, gender-sensitive and interactive research, teaching, learning and outreach programmes (University for Development Studies, 2005a). The mission statement therefore stands as the yardstick to determine the extent to which the university has achieved its quality objectives practically based on how the core activities of teaching, research and community engagement have engaged in dealing with the practical needs of the people such as developing simple but effective methods of farming, animal rearing, gender equity etc.

4.2.2 Teaching and learning. The quality of teaching and learning is broadly determined by how it may lead to the realisation of the university’s broad aims, based on its mandate that states:
The university shall... provide practical training in the subjects taught, particularly subjects which are related to agriculture, social sciences, economics, health, environment and culture and shall in the training use and apply on material available in the north of Ghana in particular and the country in general (Government of Ghana, 1992).

To tailor the teaching and learning activities to achieve its aims, the academic framework is structured into a trimester system; the first two trimesters are university/on-campus based teaching and learning activities and the third trimester spent in communities for a practical component of the academic programme (University for Development Studies, 2005b). All respondents referred to this academic framework in the interviews, for example, a lecturer stated:

We have three trimesters in an academic year; the first two involve academic work in the classroom and in the third, students go into villages and study the communities in the first year. In the second year they go to identify problems of the communities... The third year is used to write proposals for intervention...

The content of curricula materials across all disciplines are structured such that they are concerned with themes that are seen to be relevant to the practical needs and concerns of the community. This is geared towards making the curriculum a tool for “socio-economic transformation driven by the needs of society”. In this connection, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Kaburise, states:

The curricula of the faculties of UDS emphasize community entry, community dialogue, extension and practical tools of inquiry (Kaburise, 2003, p. 3).

The curricula, in many areas, defy the traditional recommended materials that are usually associated with university level courses involving agriculture, the social sciences and medical studies. One important illustration to this is the impasse between the university and the Ghana Medical Association (GMA) which will be discussed in a later section. The university argues that the “notion of university-community engagement differs from other forms of engagement in its direct and very specific focus on community engagement as a pedagogical paradigm...” (Kaburise, 2006, p. 2), hence its quality measure is centred on this perspective.

4.2.3 Access and participation policy. The admission policy of UDS is skewed towards the deprived and disadvantaged. In 2005 the total number of students stood at 4,911 students (University for Development Studies, 2005b) and up to 70 percent of students come from Northern Ghana and 30 percent from the rest of the country. Generally, admission requirements into the University are similar to the traditional universities in Ghana, and are open to all qualified applicants throughout the country and beyond, although preference is given to applicants hailing from the catchments area. An assistant registrar in charge of admissions stated:

Although we welcome and consider applications from all over the country, preference is usually given to applicants who come from the university’s catchments, but this does not mean that we do not consider applicants with very good results from other parts of the country.

Though its admission policy may have equality and ethical implications, it nonetheless falls within the university’s mission of equity and improve access. For example, Female participation in higher education is generally low in Ghana and particularly serious in Northern Ghana. Against this background, UDS has established an office to
ensure equity of access for gender. The Gender Mainstreaming Programme Office (GMPO) has an objective of promoting gender parity. It is aimed at working “towards reducing and eventually eliminating the gender inequalities within the University and its constituent communities” (University for Development Studies, 2004b, p. 61).

Accordingly, “This policy allows for more female applicants to gain admission ensuring that all female applicants who meet the basic entry requirements are admitted (affirmative action). This policy is seen as an illustration of its ‘fitness for purpose’ stance in relation to its policies and activities.”

4.2.4 Research. Quality of research is also broadly based on the university’s mission statement, particularly the extent to which it reflects the developmental challenges of the catchment communities. According to the law that established the university, its aim is to “undertake research and promote the advancement and dissemination of knowledge and its application to the needs and aspirations of the people of Ghana”. The research policy of the university places a strong emphasis on research activities reflecting the developmental needs of the local communities. Based on this policy, academics conduct (are expected to) research in areas that would lead to improvements such as healthy living, developed effective ways farming (crop production and animal rearing), and alleviate poverty. In this context, research would be adjudged as having high quality if it positively impacts on the development needs of the local communities.

To pursue its research policy agenda, in 2000 the university established a research centre known as the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (CIR). The aim of this research centre is to:

... promote and seek support for and conduct interdisciplinary research, facilitate and co-ordinate the research activities of the academic faculties, train researchers, and disseminate research findings through professional meetings and publications (University for Development Studies, 2004b).

The centre focuses on applied and basic research; it also conducts research that is policy-oriented and demand-driven. It works towards becoming what it termed a “world-class fountainhead”, in which its research and scholarship would propel the overall development of the nation and Northern Ghana in particular.

4.2.5 Community engagement. To attempt to understand what community engagement is in the university is to move into complex array of issues that are invariably and inextricably linked to every aspect of its life. Quality of community engagement moves beyond the traditional notion of students carrying out projects/long essays/dissertations that are theoretical-based and far removed from issues of the moment. As a university designed to serve the needs of its community, attempts are made by all of its core activities to this. The underlying principles guiding its entire operation are based on community interaction, discussing and understanding “local knowledge” and blending such knowledge to “scientific knowledge” in ways that would propel effective and efficient use of local resources to better the lot of the communities concerned. The Community Outreach Programme (COP) is the underlying strategy that guides the relations and interactions between the University community and the local community. The COP is a strategy that seeks to connect, conceptually and practically, all the activities of the University to the developmental needs of its catchments, through the creation and organisation of programmes that involve the practicalisation of such activities and directly interacting with communities. According to the university policy, it “represents the concrete
organisational base of the university that will ensure that its vision of promoting pro-poor scholarship to achieve the developmental aspirations of deprived communities is achieved” (University for Development Studies, 2004a, p. 91).

The Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP) is one of the main ways through which the university engages with the community. The TTFPP is organised and run by the Centre for Field Practical Training and Community Relations (CFPTCR), which ensures that students are put into appropriate teams and allocated to communities. The rationale for this approach is to “enable students to appreciate community problems and opportunities in a holistic manner ... help broaden the knowledge and experience as they would have the opportunity to interact and learn from each other” (University for Development Studies, 2004a, p. 95). The TTFPP has two interrelated dimensions: students’ academic benefits and community developmental benefits, both of which stand as forms of the University engaging with the community. Students go to live in and interact with communities for up to eight weeks for three consecutive years of their four year degree programme. During the TTFPP, students also work directly in existing programmes or projects being carried out by local and international development organisations or bodies that predisposes them not only to experiences of working with the community but gaining first hand information about the challenges and developmental needs of the given communities. The outcome of students TTFPP activities should lead to the development of a database concerning developmental matters in communities, which is made available to district assemblies, government departments and non-governmental organisation to use to initiate developments.

A respondent summarised the quality monitoring and evaluation process of the university as:

We determine quality programmes by various methods; first of all we have independent external examiners who evaluate levels, standards of our questions, our marking and everything else, that is external. I already mentioned the National Accreditation Board. In addition to that we normally let students at the end of each course anonymously evaluate the lecturers ... In addition to that we also evaluate it, we have departmental meetings in which we discuss our courses and so on. So we use all these methods, external and internal.

The university’s approach to quality may be equated to Lim’s (2001) “instrumental approach”; this ensures that the educational provision fulfils its purpose by making the process practically reflective of the institutional mission and function. Hence, the perspective seems to be consistent with local and state quality expectations: designing its provision to meet local developmental needs as well as an engine to propel national development. However, the crucial question is whether the University is achieving its set objectives or not. Acknowledgeably, the whole process is weakened by resource constraints and require complementary strategies to close major gaps that pose as potential threats to the success of the university’s paradigm, which would be discussed later.

5. The quality dilemma
So, to what extent does UDS’s quality perspective and practice consistent and compatible with its stakeholders’ quality perspectives and expectations? The main stakeholders of the university are its local community, the state, professional organisations, and some international donor organisations. The sources of quality
The dilemmas of the university will be discussed under academic views and student assessment/evaluation practices, professional organisations, the international community and state of university resources.

The first source of quality dilemma has to do with the views of some academics in the university and other public universities in Ghana with regards to the nature of the curriculum and mode of delivery. Evidence indicate that some academics within the university and from the old public universities in Ghana (who have operated along the academic oriented model of higher education since pre-independence) view the UDS as a deficit model that lowers academic standards and defies the status of the university as a place for higher learning that engages in critical academic discourse. A respondent notes that some of the older universities view the TTFPP as a waste of students’ crucial academic time; a time they badly need to cover essential academic topics. They also question the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme. But UDS sees the TTFPP as one of the unique and innovative component of its delivery that demonstrates the fitness for purpose component of their academic activities. Ironically, the assessment and monitory system is more or less based on the traditional system of assessment and evaluation of students work. While the university’s mission and delivery processes are pragmatic and firmly grounded on a model of linking all activities to the needs of its catchment communities, it will be expected that the assessment and monitoring should be based more on this model, that is, the extent to which students learning experiences have concrete or potential impact on community regeneration and development.

Another important source of the university’s quality dilemma is the view of professional bodies with regards to what they consider acceptable quality of training for their prospective members. The most prominent and relevant among these professional organisations is the Ghana Medical Association (GMA). The GMA is a body that plays an important role in the recognition of qualified medical doctors in the country. Since the establishment of the University’s School of Medicine and Health Sciences which has an objective of training people in the area of anatomy; biophysics and physiology; pharmacology; molecular medicine and biochemistry; ophthalmology; community health; community nutrition; nursing and allied health sciences; and surgery, the GMA has consistently expressed grave concern and its opposition about the nature and structure of the medical programmes and the quality of training given at the school. The Bachelor of Medicine curriculum was designed to include courses that involved community-based training; such courses were substituted with some other courses in the recommended GMA list of courses. Two assumptions seem to have led to this: firstly, it was thought that such courses were indeed necessary to achieve the overall aim of the university – tailoring the training programme to meet the health needs of the local populace in the theoretical and practical sense. Secondly, the alterations would “compel” graduates to stay and work in the rural communities for which they were trained for.

The GMA thinks otherwise, arguing for status quo to be maintained. Another area of concerned by the Association is the lack of standard and stable teaching hospital attached to the university. The medical students currently undergo their clinical practice at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology at Kumasi and the University of Ghana Medical School, all located in Southern Ghana. As a result of this impasse, the programme and graduates are not recognised by the association. In
the current Strategic Plan, the non-accreditation of programmes in the School of Medicine and Health Sciences is cited as one of the threats to the university (University for Development Studies, 2003).

Closely related to the above is the dilemma of meeting the quality stands of major international stakeholders such as the World Bank and the international higher education community which is more or less influenced by the “western” conception of quality. Data indicate that during the initial years of UDS, the World Bank refused to recognise it for its funding package for higher education in Ghana partly because the university programmes and mode of delivery did not meet the requisite standards set by the Bank (which was nonetheless within the conventional measure of quality of HE). Although, the World Bank now recognises the university for the purposes of benefiting from its financial packages, its policy focus on higher education is that of economic rather than broadly developmental in the context of developing countries. Hence, some respondents (hardliners of the UDS model) expressed scepticism and concerns about the process that still require them to demonstrate conventional quality traits such as peer review publications to the detriment of practical show cases. Similarly, in the international context, quality of higher education is generally view in terms of the economic returns more related to the “knowledge revolution” and characterised among other things by how relevant the skills of graduates are to the labour market, the rate at which scientific papers are published, and the number of patents gained. This perspective stands in direct contrast with the UDS’ model of higher education that seeks to make its delivery beneficial to the local populace.

The choice between local and international quality imperatives is another quality dilemma that the University faces; should it adhere to the local quality indicators or adapt to the international quality standards? The nature of the higher education system in the international context is increasingly becoming complex and requires complex mechanisms and concepts to deal with, as such, complex quality management and control systems and strategies have been developed. Most of these are modelled based on the more developed societies’ concept of the function of the university and could bring not much benefits if transplanted piece-mail into the developing context such as in the UDS. On the other hand, the more developed societies view themselves as the touch bearers of advancement and to some extend measure quality on this basis; hence in some cases the UDS has unconsciously used these parameters (e.g. the policy of using peer reviewed journals as basis to promote staff regardless of whether such academic articles are related to its overall policy objective or not) not as a deliberate strategy to help achieve its objectives but most importantly to gain a nod by the so-called international community as a credible model.

The state of the university’s resources could be a source of quality dilemma in the sense that the theoretical basis and arguments of its operation to achieve its mission objectives may be well grounded with goodwill from most university staff, the availability of resources to pursue the agenda systematically and strategically is no doubt a major factor. There are indications that there are inadequate resources to pursue the agenda. For example, the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, is noted to be lacking lecturers in some key courses and equipment to support medical trainees; while currently using both human and material resources from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and the University of Ghana. However, in faculties such as Integrated Development Studies and Agriculture there seem to be
enough experts to handle programmes and courses. Physical infrastructure such as lecture rooms, laboratories, teaching and learning equipment (e.g. ICT support), and means of transport were some of the material resources respondents mentioned as lacking which may negatively affect the effectiveness and efficiency of their work as academics. A lecturer said:

We lack vital equipment at the teaching hospital to support students’ work ... these two rooms are the only places allocated to the teaching staff from the university ... you can see this yourself.

Some examples of the situation involving infrastructure was at the Wa Campus where an uncompleted three story block for the District Assembly has been converted by the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies for use as lecturers’ offices and lecture rooms. Another uncompleted Assembly Hall building said to be owned by the Regional House of Chiefs is currently used to hold mass lectures. A respondent stated:

... the classrooms, I don't know whether you have been to our lecture hall, it is in a very bad state and does not auger well for academic work ... A very large hall, at times if you have a lecture in the evening, the lighting system is bad, so it normally affect your delivery, and the numbers are too large especially if you take level 200 and level 100.

According to the 2004 financial statement, over 77 per cent of the university’s income comes from government subvention and up to 80 per cent of the remaining 23 per cent comes from user and registration fees from students. Conversely, it is suggested that about 58 percent of the university’s annual budgetary proposals are met by government subvention, leaving it in a financial obscured position. However, many respondents estimated that up to 95 per cent of the university financial resources come from central government. A senior academic stated:

... We cannot also make money from the NGOs who come to help us do our work that is why our financial situation is precarious. At present we depend solely on the government for funding, which is not even enough to meet our annual budget, this is really a serious problem ... But we still must have to do something, a form of business.

According to most respondents, the tight financial situation of the university has negatively affected the delivery process, including infrastructure, equipment, transport etc; even though some stressed that despite that, they are putting up their very best, for example a respondent said:

... that is why the question of adequate resources has always been an issue in almost every university in this country ... I did my masters at Northampton and I can assure you that we did not get all the resources we need. So we are making efficient use of the limited resources we have here.

6. What are the realities?
To be able to deal effectively with this dilemma it is important to clarify the realities within the UDS and the ensuing challenges. According to a research report on quality assurance in African higher education, quality audits in Africa is centred on a wide range of areas including the extent to which institutions meet their missions and goals; relevance of academic and professional programs (Hayward, 2006), but it is generally agreed that quality in higher education institutions in Africa is badly affected by
unfavourable socio-economic and political events which has resulted in a “gross
decline” in the quality (AAU, 2007). This and similar broad statements are made about
the quality of HE in developing countries. But what seems to be missing is an
argument that calls for the system to be more pragmatic in policy, scope and delivery:
formulating policies that reflect the challenges and firmly linking these to core
university activities; which should then be supported by a well designed quality audit
system that is appropriate in assessing, in the practical sense, the impact of the
university activity on its socio-economic and cultural environment. The University for
Development Studies’ model seems to be closer to doing this and could be an effective
model to deal broadly with the developmental challenges of most developing contexts.
This means that if quality were to be viewed simply as “fitness of purpose” and
“fitness for purpose” the university’s policies and practices would likely have score
well in the fitness test, on condition that they had adequate and appropriate resources.

However, it is a fact that the level of a university’s resource-base and use are
important components that define its quality status and successes, and usually cover
human, material and financial aspects. In its official mission statement, the university
have an agenda of using local resources to support many of its activities; however, the
extent to which this has been achieved is still unclear. Although it is argued that the
human resource-base of the university is the least of its worries, issues of financial and
material resources are at the top of its needs. According to the 2005 Vice-Chancellor’s
report, “the university’s resource-base is extremely thin, mainly because it did not have
a foundation grant like other public universities in Ghana” (University for
Development Studies, 2005b) and a recent report also shows that the medical
training is being slowed by the sheer lack of funding (Zakarria, 2007).

Hence, the reality is that there has not been a corresponding quality management
regime that is systematic and reflective of this innovative model. Quality assurance
and control is limited to the broad recognition by the NCTE and NAB of its academic
programmes. Academics responses to the question of how the quality of teaching,
research and community engagement are evaluated within the internal structure were
also limited to the conventional student assessment methods, programme evaluation
questionnaire completed by students, peer reviewed publications and students’
fieldwork and report presentations which fall short of providing a clearer picture of the
effectiveness of the model. As at June 2005 there had not been any major
university-wide evaluation study to understand the extent to which the university has
achieved its set objectives; particularly the impact its activities have had on the local
community and the degree at which it has translated its motto of “knowledge for
service” to action. Part of the causes of the university’s inability to carry out regular
essential evaluation exercises to track its performance has been blamed on the acute
lack of financial resources to support such exercises. In view of this, it is hard to
scientifically determine the quality state of the UDS. However, what seems to be clear
is that the financial constraint on the UDS has dichotomised the quality of its
knowledge for service slogan into what may be termed “rhetoric” and “non-rhetoric”
dimensions (Abukari, 2010).

7. Creating the balance
As the crux of the university’s quality predicament lies with the inadequacy of
resources, it is important to develop an alternative competitive strategy that takes into
consideration the quality perspectives of stakeholders as well as acknowledging the current context of higher education as the first point of call. It is argued that the boundary line between the university, state and industry is blurring (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000) as a result of the so-called globalisation that favours mutual and constructive partnership between universities and other social organs across the national and international realms. This is to say that the world is now more competitive, interdependent, interconnected and exploitative than ever and no one entity could claim to live in isolation, therefore the UDS needs to take both the local and international issues into consideration, so as to ensure that while it tries to deal with important local needs and aspirations, it also aims at becoming competitive in the global arena as well as balancing all these with the unavoidable stringent partner conditions. This is because the course of development has no specific or well defined pattern and communities can alter the pattern by being strategic, proactive, and innovative by leapfrogging through dealing simultaneously with both internal and external challenges. The UDS may not need to adhere strictly to the prescribed donor quality standards that are in most cases based on the more developed context and unworkable in its context, but most importantly it needs to understand these standards: identify the workable and unworkable, relevant and the irrelevant, the short term and long term benefits, and the implications on any decision on these standards. Based on this, it could have an informed engagement with its partners on the best way forward. This therefore calls for the recruitment of scholars with the appropriate skills and experience who can take on and engage meaningfully with this complex and challenging task.

Furthermore, the university could break down its strategic policy into short-term and long-term plans. The short-term strategy would deal with specific issues within a specific timeframe (time range depending on the nature of the issues and the level of resources). This means that UDS would require concentration on the basic developmental needs, for example health needs which may require the stepping up of the training of community nurses (benefits accruing from the training process and after training service). Those developmental needs outlined in its strategic statement should be viewed as the short-term strategy, in which the communities would be supported to acquire the basic knowledge, skills and attitudes required to foster a more proactive engagement in their daily activities. The objectives and overall framework of the short-term strategic plan should be firmly linked to the long-term plan. The long-term plan should define the vision of Northern Ghana and the country as a whole. This plan goes beyond simply assisting the communities to acquire and use basic knowledge about farming and healthy living. It should rather aspire to assist its communities and the country as a whole to become progressive; advanced and competitive internationally through expanding its programmes to include advanced information technology. The argument is that it is not the entire populace that is underdeveloped, some communities and individuals are well informed and operating commercial farming and large scale business activities that need to develop on their operations. This should involve strategic thinking – (looking beyond the day-to-day activities towards the vision for the future); strategic planning – (setting out long term objectives, developing and implementing plans aimed achieving these objectives); strategic management – (thinking, planning and acting tactically towards the long-term successes); and strategic learning – (learning from the process through
understanding what works and what does not and how to deal effectively and efficiently with emerging challenges (Stonehouse and Pemberton, 2002).

Powerful stakeholders of the university such as international donor organisations and professional bodies also have a crucial responsibility of holding open and constructive discussions with it, taking cognisance of its contexts, in order to understand the complex terrain and to offer alternative and productive suggestions and support towards achieving the unflinching objective of propelling development in these societies. The general commitment of using higher education for development could achieve better results if professional and donor organisations avoid wholesale transplant of quality standards into universities in less developed contexts (Idrus, 2003). Although different perspectives of development exist, ranging from views that see development as social modernisation to those of economic expansion; the UDS view of development is that of expansion of the real freedom of the people through the removal of what Amartya Sen terms “unfreedom” – poverty, poor economic opportunities and social deprivation (Manuh et al., 2007, p. 10). However, the important point to note here is not a question of what perspective of development is appropriate for real development “but rather of knowing what kind of education is appropriate for what kind of development … prescriptions are rarely “either-or” or “right-wrong”, but rather “under what conditions” and “for what purpose” (Fagerlind and Saha, 1989, p. 283).

8. Conclusion
This paper humbly acknowledges the crucial rule external donors and standard quality control measures play in ensuring that “quality” is maintained across higher education institutions across the globe, however it argues that the basis for any effective quality should be grounded on the principle of mutual benefits to all stakeholders; moving beyond the conventional precepts and the imposing and exploitative conditions by major stakeholders (especially major donors) to make it reflect local needs and realities. It stresses that debates on quality of higher education in the developing world should be centred on how the system can be more pragmatic in policy, scope and delivery that reflect current challenges and translate into core activities of teaching and learning, research and community engagement; which should then be supported by a well designed quality audit system that is appropriate in assessing, in the practical sense, the impact of the university activity on its socio-economic and cultural environment.

In addition, the paper highlights the current realities of the world; higher education operates in a context of competition, interdependence, interconnectedness and exploitation at an unprecedented level and no one entity could claim to live in isolation, therefore the UDS and indeed universities in the developing world need to take both the local and international issues into consideration, so as to ensure that while institutions try to deal with important local challenges, they also strive towards becoming competitive in the global arena as well as balancing all these with the unavoidable stringent partner conditions. This is because the course of development has no specific or well-defined pattern and communities can alter the pattern by being strategic, proactive, and innovative by leapfrogging through dealing simultaneously with both internal and external challenges.
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