

Institutional Evaluation of the University of Ghana



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Brown-Bag Seminar

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Introduction

I am honoured to have the opportunity of presenting two brown-bag seminars at the World Bank in two days. Today the general issue that I shall address is the renewal of African universities. I shall focus on this through the lens of an institutional evaluation of the University of Ghana conducted by a Visitation Panel that I had the honour to chair last year.

I had expected that Professor Aki Sawyerr would be in town and with us today. He was the Vice-Chair of our Panel as well as being a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana and now Secretary-General of the Association of African Universities. His presence would have added greatly to our discussion but unfortunately, due to an aircraft breakdown, he was unable to leave Ghana on Monday.

I acknowledge the help of two other colleagues. Dr Willie Clarke-Okah is our Higher Education Specialist at COL. He organised an institutional trial quality audit for the University of South Africa, UNISA, last year and the two of us have reflected on how these visitations can be made optimally cost-effective.

Stamenka Uvalić-Trumbić, who is the Chief of the Section on Reform, Innovation and Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Division at UNESCO was the other member of the University of Ghana Visitation Panel from an intergovernmental organisation and arranged for UNESCO to do some research in support of our work. She has asked me to alert you to the World Conference on Higher Education + 10 that UNESCO is organising from 6-10 July 2009. This major event, which follows similar conferences held in 1999 and 2005 will review the state of higher education worldwide and identify current priorities. One day will be devoted solely to higher education in Africa, which links to our topic today.

The general issue that I want to address this afternoon is how external bodies usefully assist in the renewal of universities, particularly in Africa, that have suffered years of neglect and now face exploding demand.

Some countries, like South Africa and Nigeria, already have national bodies for quality assurance. For example, the University of South Africa will face an audit by the Higher Education Quality Committee of South Africa's Council for Higher Education this year. This body has shown that it has real teeth. UNISA decided to prepare itself by asking COL to organise a mock audit or trial run in 2007.

In Ghana the National Accreditation Board is less well established. The University of Ghana faced the general problem of huge expansion of student numbers - from 5,000 to over 25,000 in less than ten years with almost no increase in staff - and had experienced the specific problem of a high-profile breach of security in its examination system some years back. It decided to call in an international Visitation Panel to advise it on the general development of the University.

Establishment of the Visitation Panel

This Visitation Panel, which the Vice-Chancellor set up on behalf of Council a year ago, was a remarkable group of Ghanaian and international specialists whose collective expertise ranged over all aspects of higher education. I had the honour to chair the Panel and was tremendously fortunate to have as my Vice-Chair Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr. The 13 other members came from Ghana and around the world: India, Jamaica, Nigeria, the UK the USA and UNESCO.

The Terms of Reference which the University established for the Panel's work focused on three areas: Academic Programmes; Infrastructure and Resources, and the University's Administrative and Governance arrangements. The breadth of this mandate is a major difference between the work of this Visitation Panel and the normal task of a quality audit panel sent in by a national quality assurance agency.

Another major difference was that a quality audit team usually goes into an institution after having received a substantial self-assessment document from the institution. We had no such document and one of our decisions, to which I shall return, was to commission such self-assessments during our first visit.

To carry out the work the Panel made two week-long visits to Accra, one in April and the second in August. These visits enabled us to meet the various constituencies of the University. At our suggestion the University also commissioned a special investigation into the Financial Administrative System, which was the source of particularly acute and pervasive problems.

During the last months of 2007 we drafted the report online using the Basecamp software, which proved invaluable. I was the chief editor and I can attest that drafting a major report online with panel members in eight countries is not an easy process. A number of issues on which panel members had differing views needed to be resolved during the drafting. However, I believe that the transparency of the process and the opportunity for multiple iterations produced a good report. We made it a rule to give clear and precise recommendations to the University rather than fudging our disagreements. I am proud to say that we met our December 31 deadline with almost a month to spare.

The University put the excellent facilities of the Centre for African Wetlands at our disposal during our visits.

The Visitation Panel's Report

We produced a substantial Report, which runs to some 127 pages with annexes. I shall talk about only a few highlights today which are of general interest.

I shall not give the background on the University of Ghana, except to show this picture of the University's Great Hall and this quotation from a current professor who was a student here in the 1970s. The point of this slide is to emphasise great aspirations that accompanied the creation of this University and the fond memories that its early students took away from their time there.

We were asked to form a Visitation Panel because Council perceived that the University was slipping in its fulfilment of those national aspirations and in its service to students. All members of our Visitation Panel believed that the University can recover its pre-eminent role in the intellectual life of Ghana. Our efforts were directed to helping the University to achieve that. I should have noted that many of the overseas panel members did have previous experience of Ghana and the University and knew something of the context.

Chapter Two places the University of Ghana in its African and National Contexts and I shall not dwell on this either, except to say that we found the work of your colleague Peter Materu particularly useful. This chapter addresses issues for the Government as well as the University.

Instead I shall focus selectively on Chapter Three, which is the meat of our report. It is in three sections, each devoted to one of the themes in our terms of reference. First, we looked at the University as a Corporate Body and issues of Governance, Management and Administration. I shall talk only about the composition of the Governing Council, the Organisation of Management and Administration, and Student Representation.

This main chapter is entitled 'Analysis, Conclusions and Recommendations'. As that implies we tried to analyse the situations we found, draw our conclusions, and then articulate those in the form of recommendations. We have also given examples of practice in other countries where we thought it relevant.

In the slides that follow I have taken short verbatim quotes from our Report under the headings of analysis, conclusions and recommendations. This is the best way to be faithful to Panel's Report rather than giving you my own gloss on it. On occasion this approach may seem over-detailed, but it makes for authenticity and, in any case, the devil is in the detail.

Composition and Role of the Council

Our first finding was the composition and role of the University of Ghana Council is seriously out of line with practice in other countries that Ghana might normally use as comparators. UNESCO helped us look at this issue by researching practice in Australia and New Zealand and we found useful guidelines in South Africa and the UK.

The Panel concluded that current good practice calls for a governing body of between 15 to 30 members, with a lay (external) majority of about two-thirds to one third, with a significant proportion of the lay majority brought on to the governing body through a nominations committee process to ensure that there is expertise in areas such as finance, property management, legal matters, and human resource management.

Set against such practice and against the emerging consensus about governance around the world, the Council of the University of Ghana is unusual in three ways. First, at 15 members, it is smaller than the governing bodies of many universities of similar size, where a figure of around 25 might be more usual. Second, the Council membership is mostly nominated by external bodies or drawn from internal constituencies. Third, and most unusually, a majority of the membership is from these internal constituencies.

Two of our key recommendations are therefore that:

1. The membership of the Council should be expanded to over 20 members and its composition should be substantially changed to enable it to play an effective role as the governing body of the University.

And that

The Council should have committees for:

Audit

Finance and General Purposes;

Nominations;

Physical Development

Curiously these committees, which in most universities would be committees of the Council, were committees of the Academic Board. This recommendation was not just governance theory.

The Panel believes that if, in recent years, the University of Ghana Council had had the role and composition that we recommend some of the problems that the University now faces, notably in its financial management, would have been avoided.

Management and Administration

I shall pass over our recommendations about the Academic Board and talk about the way the University manages and administers itself.

We found that the structures for managing the University, undermined by the managerial reforms introduced in 2003, have allowed the University, overwhelmed by student number expansion, to slide into a poor state of organisation and effectiveness.

We noted that in 2003 the then Vice-Chancellor introduced a new organisational structure...

Whatever the theoretical merits of this reorganisation it clearly has not worked. We conclude that the Vice-Chancellor needs what in some universities is called a Chief Operating Officer, a senior officer who integrates the management of the many services that are necessary to the running of the University...

This reorganisation is all the more necessary because there are serious operational problems in the management of the Finance Office and in the physical maintenance of the campus and its facilities.

Essentially the reform of 2003 had produced a highly diffuse structure of accountability and responsibility, with the result that things were simply not getting done.

The Panel recommends that the Council should give the Registrar the responsibilities of Chief Operating Officer with a mandate: (i) to integrate and professionalise the services necessary to the running of the University and make them work; (ii) to present a new administrative structure chart to Council and the Academic Board after consultation with the Vice-Chancellor and the (new) Policy and Executive Committee; (iii) to introduce modern human resources practices throughout the institution so that the operating units are empowered and supported in fulfilling their functions; and (iv) to implement an effective and transparent management information system.

Student Representation

The next issue we tackled was student representation.

We found that students are not well represented on the governance of the University particularly in areas where academic matters are discussed. They are not satisfied with the constitutional role of the Dean of Students and wish to represent themselves in discussions with the university authorities.

On this issue UNESCO kindly conducted some research amongst the universities of Europe from which we observed:

The almost universal Western practice of student involvement in University governance structures because they are universities' key stakeholders. As payment of tuition fees becomes more and more universal this pressure for taking account of students' views will only increase.

The major strategic committees of the University should not be dealing with detail of student examination results and staff promotions - agenda items which are cited as a reason for excluding students from these bodies

So the Panel recommends:

That the University introduces student representation on the Council, the Academic Board, the Faculty Boards and committees of these bodies as appropriate.

I shall be very brief about our findings on the University as an Academic Institution. Although this is the core of the University's work, academic quality assurance is increasingly well-trodden territory.

I believe that the most useful thing the Panel did on the academic side was probably to launch a process of departmental self assessment. These began after our first visit and over sixty departments had reported by the time we came back. Some reports were good and professional, others were lamentably superficial. However, this process got the attention of the university community like nothing else and will continue.

Enrolment Explosion

The main reason for the degradation of the University that led to the setting up of the Visitation Panel was and is an Enrolment Explosion.

The enrolment explosion is the cause of many of the University's problems. The Panel recommends reducing the intake of students; placing a limit on class size; balancing student numbers with physical infrastructure and faculty capacity; introducing stronger policy for gender parity; promoting distance learning to absorb continuing demand; and expanding Accra City Campus.

It was clear that the enrolments on the main campus have to be capped and reduced. There is simply not enough water for the numbers now on campus and, as a consequence, at least one of the student residences was an epidemic waiting to break out. I am pleased to say that the University has already taken action on that problem.

However, given the pressure of demand for tertiary education in Africa it would not have been responsible for a panel like ours simply to recommend cutting numbers. This motivated our recommendations about distance learning and expanding off-campus sites. Ghana has since decided to create an open university to begin operations later this year.

The Financial Administrative System

Finally, I turn to our section on Infrastructure and Resources. You can see that we looked at 12 issues. Because its seriousness far outweighs all the others, I shall focus only on the first, the Financial Administrative System.

We are sorry to find that the financial administrative system at the University of Ghana is in a very bad state, is not providing anything approaching the services needed by the University, and needs radical change.

The Team concluded that *the Finance Office needs new leadership as soon as possible. The current direction of the Office's work is wrong.*

But also that *the ITS financial software can be made to serve the University's needs, and probably serve them well, so should be retained.*

It urges that *Budgeting, reporting and accounting by the Finance Office has to be transformed by new practices, so that the University's financial position and prospects are understood at all levels of management.*

The Team's Report has a series of detailed recommendations about how to transform a bad situation.

But there is some good news.

Most institutions with such weaknesses find they are in a financial hole; but the University of Ghana has significant unspent balances - which could be harnessed to the agenda for change.

That gives you some of the highlights of the report. The University Council has been deliberating on the report this month and, as I noted, some recommendations are already being implemented.

The Wider Context

To conclude I shall comment in two ways. First, I would like to look at the issues I have highlighted at the University of Ghana in a wider context. Second, I shall reflect on the process of visitation itself.

I have focused on issues of governance, management, student representation, enrolment planning and financial systems.

The point I wish to stress is that unless a university has robust and effective structures and processes in these areas it will not be able to undertake any process of renewal effectively.

However, the normal processes of academic audit and quality assurance do not usually address these larger issues. This is one of the advantages of having a panel with a broad remit.

Indeed, even the Trial Institutional Audit Panel for the University of South Africa found that in order to be useful it had to go beyond the normal methodology of the national quality assurance body. The key issue at UNISA is that although it is a distance-teaching institution with a quarter of a million students, most of the staff members interviewed by the Panel did not realize they were in the distance learning business. The Panel made recommendations about how to change this.

The Process of Visitation

Finally, what about the process of visitation itself? For a large international panel like our Ghana panel to make two week-long visits is an expensive proposition and not a prescription that could be applied very generally. How could the process be made more cost effective? Dr Clarke-Okah and I addressed this question in a paper to the International Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa in Tanzania last September.

Two moves could get the cost down. The first is to require institutional self-studies or self-assessments to be conducted beforehand. The panel would then only need to visit once. The second is to reduce the size of the panel. We proposed that a panel of six members could be effective provided they were carefully chosen for their expertise in the issues likely to be encountered during the visit.

As regards the impact of the work, much depends on the publicity surrounding a visitation and the intensity of a panel's interaction with the university community and its stakeholders. We believe that had either the UNISA or the University of Ghana reports been produced by individual consultants they would have had minimal impact for reform, even if the content of the reports had been exactly the same as those the panels produced.

The two advantages of having the study done by a group are first, its potential for credibility within the university community and government if its members are respected figures, and second, the impact the group can have by splitting up and visiting widely within the institution. It also helps if the university authorities signal their strong commitment to the process and give the panel an opportunity to present its findings publicly.

Conclusion

Those are some thoughts on one way of helping African universities achieve the renewal that they need to serve their societies. I hope they will be useful to you as you continue to engage with this challenge.

Thank you