

# Clients' perception of quality tertiary education in Ghana

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**ABSTRACT:** Tertiary education institutions are established to provide quality post-secondary education. Tertiary education institutions have established quality assurance units to guarantee that clients are served appropriately according to predefined quality indicators. Despite this guarantee, the quality of tertiary education is being questioned. This paper discusses the quality of tertiary education largely from the perspective of clients. It explores the concept of quality, examines a model of the path to quality tertiary education, and states the challenges of institutional massification with respect to quality. The discussion points to the key roles of leadership and management and institutional massification play in student engagement. Leadership and management have to set the stage for the process of achieving quality tertiary education, and sustain the process by harnessing human and material resources to meaningfully engage students. Leadership provides the physical infrastructure, recruits qualified staff, operationalizes sound employability and entrepreneurship strategies, and creates a democratic environment to promote accountability and productivity. At the heart of quality tertiary education is good student engagement. While massification has improved access and equity, it has put pressure on physical infrastructure and staff and reduced the quality of student engagement.

**Keywords:** Quality, tertiary education, student engagement, leadership, massification.

## INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education institutions exist to provide quality higher education to clients. Tertiary education institutions have evolved to become centers for training a large proportion of the young generation for the job market. Tertiary education provides education and training within a framework of teaching and research to produce professionals. Providers of tertiary education have the responsibility of conducting research covering an array of disciplines and use the research findings to inform the training of young people, to maintain a constant supply of people for the job market. The role of tertiary education is not only to produce graduates as the workforce. It helps in maintaining and improving general living conditions, contribute to the improvement of the organization of society, and also helps individuals to cope with the growing complexities of work processes. From these mentioned roles, it can be noted that tertiary education is essential for promoting competitiveness and economic development.

As pointed out by Barkhordari *et al.* (2019), economies

are transiting into knowledge-based. This transition has increased the demand for high-level skills in most occupations (Švarc and Dabić, 2017). New set of competencies such as adaptability, communication skills, and motivation for continual learning are now critical for clients. According to Materu (2007), "countries wishing to move towards the knowledge economy are challenged to undertake reforms to raise the quality of education and training through changes in content and pedagogy" (p. 7). Irrespective of the entry characteristics of students, tertiary education institutions have the duty to turn students into citizens who fit well into a knowledge-based economy. For several decades, companies and institutions have had to cope with highly unstable conditions. They have to strategize to stay "competitive and achieve sustainable competitive change" (Anatan, 2010: p1). To strategize well requires smartness in the application of knowledge. Knowledge has become the primary economic resource. It is a key source of competitive advantage in fluid

economies (Altbach, 2017). Tertiary education institutions, therefore, have to position themselves to be able to produce graduates who possess the requisite knowledge that will enable them (graduates) to survive in the competitive job market or create jobs for themselves and others.

The quality of tertiary education has been questioned despite the institution of measures to assure quality. Due to market orientations, tertiary education institutions now consider the provision of tertiary education as a product (Nadiri et al., 2009). The need for tertiary education institutions to produce quality products has been driven by two major factors; competition and student mobility. Tertiary education institutions are driven by competition to examine the quality of service and where necessary redefine their products to meet client satisfaction. Due to the mobility of students and graduates into tertiary institutions within and across borders, institutions acknowledge the need to conform to national and international standards. The long-term survival of a tertiary education institution hinges on the extent to which the service they provide set them apart from all others. It is for this reason that tertiary education institutions have operationalized well-equipped Quality Assurance Units to assure quality. There are doubts among employers and the general public that tertiary education institutions are producing graduates that have the capacity to function in knowledge-based economies, as government support for tertiary education dwindles and student population has grown enormously. There is also doubt relating to the belief in the important role tertiary education plays in knowledge-based economies (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010). These doubts, which may account for public discussion on the perceived lack of quality education in recent times also raise questions about how clients of tertiary education view quality tertiary education.

### **The focus of this paper**

This paper discusses quality tertiary education largely from the perspective of students and the general public. It begins by putting quality tertiary education in context and then proposes a pathway for ensuring quality tertiary education. This paper also discusses one of the major threats to delivering quality tertiary education to students – massification. It discusses massification and then goes ahead to highlight the impact of massification on delivering quality tertiary education.

### **CONCEPT CLARIFICATION – QUALITY TERTIARY EDUCATION AND MASSIFICATION**

#### **Quality tertiary education**

Just as the term quality is evasive (Ankomah et al., 2005; Materu, 2007; Støren and Aamodt, 2010), it is difficult to

posit a single definition for quality tertiary education. Two reasons, according to Brockerhoff et al. (2015) account for evasiveness. First, quality tertiary education is dependent on the beholders' point of view and second, it is relative to the kind of standard one is interested in maintaining. Governments describe quality as the attainment of the minimum standards set by a recognized government accrediting body. Staff and students view quality in terms of the degree of engagement and the usefulness of such engagement. Employers focus on the attribute of the graduates while parents judge the behavioral characteristics and use them to ascertain whether there has been value for money and then conclude on the degree of quality of tertiary education students have received.

Even though the definition of quality tertiary education is relative to perspective, Harvey (2007) offers five conceptions that can be used to define quality tertiary education. Quality tertiary education is exceptional, perfect, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformational. With regards to exceptional quality, tertiary education is to be special, distinctive, and high-class. According to Harvey and Green (1993), quality tertiary education is that which has zero defects and has passed a set of quality checks. This notion of perfection describes quality tertiary education as the type that conforms to or is consistent with some laid down specifications. Perfection is a re-definition of the idea embedded in excellence. To be able to meet the minimum standard set by an accrediting body, the tertiary education institution must conform to the quality indicators set out by the accrediting body. Fitness for purpose emerged in the definition of quality tertiary education as a means of harnessing the drive for an ambitious 'zero defects' tertiary education. Fitness for purpose can be looked at in three ways. Providing students with tertiary education makes them independent critical thinkers, educating students to be employable and finally transforming students into individuals who possess high-level practical and analytical skills and can use these skills in a variety of work-related contexts.

An institution may be perfectly conforming to quality indicators but may be perfectly useless if its products are not fit for purpose. Considering that tertiary education is a product or service, it must conform to predetermined specifications. The challenge the fit-for-purpose concept pose is that in tertiary education, the client hardly specifies in advance the specifications upon which judgment of the quality of the product or service will be made. This notwithstanding, it is common knowledge that tertiary education should produce graduates that match the purpose for which they were educated. Fitness for purpose to a large extent results in value for money. Based on value for money, quality tertiary education is one that attains a high standard at a reasonable cost. Lastly, quality tertiary education is that which can transform fresh men and women into functional graduates. From the afore, quality

tertiary education is a high standard tertiary education that conforms to a set of predefined quality indicators to produce transformed individuals who are fit for purpose.

### **Institutional massification**

Until the later part of the 20th century, tertiary education was a preserve of the social elite and so only a small fraction of the population accessed it. These privileged few were well accommodated, fed and received what we want to call 'custom tailored training'. Custom tailored in the sense that the numbers were few and so individual students' learning needs were easily identified and addressed. In practical sessions, individuals had a whole setup to themselves, and assignments were done and presented individually and in small groups. They received quality tertiary education because the engagement challenged them to acquire and apply knowledge. By the turn of the century, government support for tertiary education dwindled, forcing tertiary education institutions to adopt strategies to generate funds to make up for the shortfalls in government funding. There was intense economic pressure on tertiary education institutions to cope with the increasing student population (Kipchumba, 2019). In order to survive, tertiary education institutions shifted from relying on government resources to non-governmental resources (Giannakis and Bullivant, 2016). These conditions coupled with the declaration by UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education (UNESCO, 1998) emphasizing the importance of tertiary education in addressing development challenges, especially in Africa, which was declared, led to the massification in tertiary education institutions.

Massification is the transition from an elite system which according to Mohamedbhai (2014) catered for "a privileged or talented group" (p. 63) to one opened up to anyone who qualified. Scott (1995) cited by Quintero-Re (2011) mentioned that it has been suggested that massification should be operationalized as an increase in the number of persons achieving academic credential rather than mere shift in social attitude towards higher education by the community. There is an assumption that the quality of the populace and national competitiveness will be improved by increasing tertiary education enrollment (Mok and Jiang, 2017). This assumption has been upheld by many developed countries. In developed countries, there are still world-class and elite universities existing as entities opened to the privileged or talented few. Ghana did not maintain such a system because at the time there were only three public universities. Ghanaian Universities however, have opened up a few programs, like medicine and law, to the privileged few who have the ability to pay or are talented. Students admitted into such programs are few and the faculties are well-resourced with funds generated from the programs opened up to the masses. The population of one of the three universities rose from

3,564 in 1996 to 24,480 in 2006 (Mohamedbhai, 2014). The enrolment rose to 37,940 in 2016. A similar enrollment trend is observed in the other two universities with much younger universities following in that direction. Even in Ghanaian Colleges of Education where enrollments were controlled due to the payment of student allowances, enrollment has increased by more than 25% since 2013.

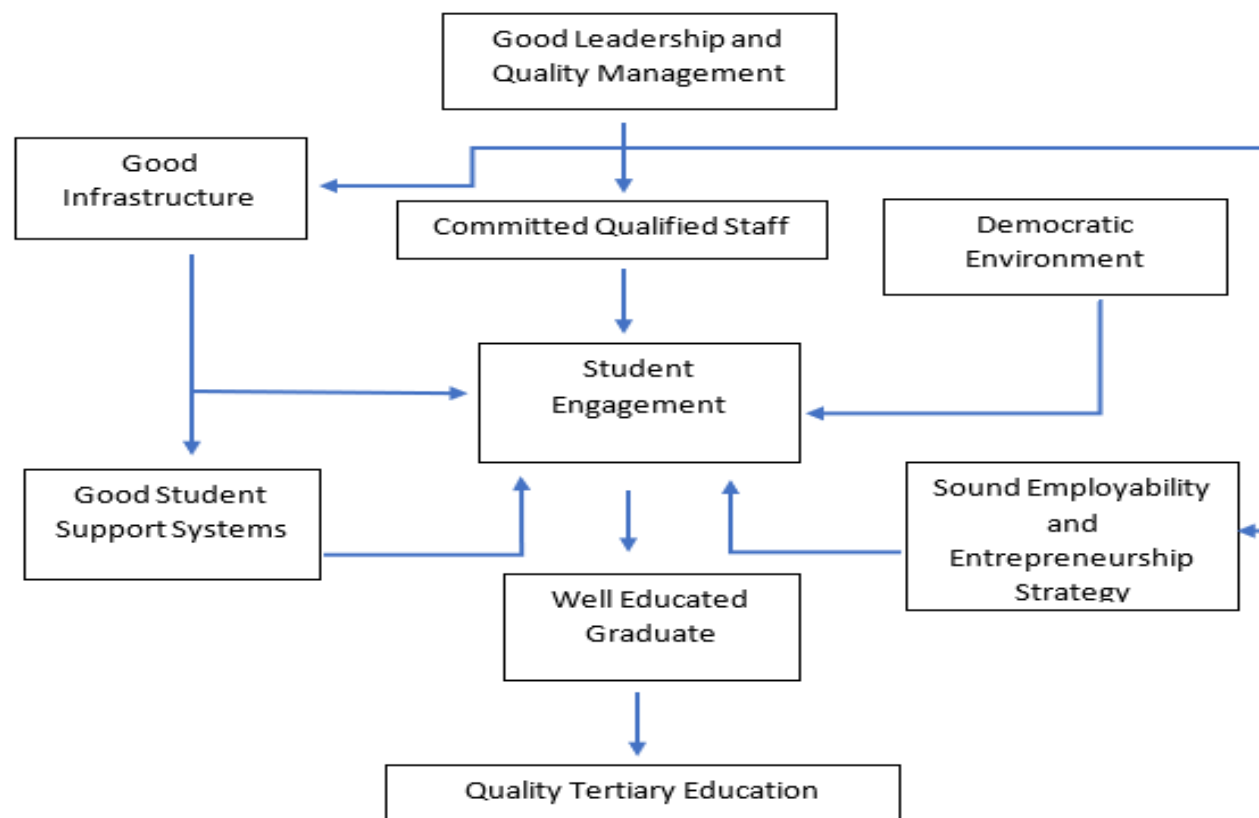
Institutional massification has a little positive but enormous negative connotations. Massification has resulted in equity in access. There are inequalities in society emanating from racial, gender, social, religious and ethnic differences among others. These inequalities are very often observed in the disaggregation of students in tertiary education institutions. The most conspicuous inequality (gender), has to large extent been addressed through affirmative actions in the selection and reservation of quotas or the provision of financial assistance to the disadvantaged group. Due to massification, it is easy for institutions to affirmatively increase enrollment for disadvantaged groups. On the flipped side, massification is a key contributor to the deterioration of quality in tertiary education.

### **CLIENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE PATH TO QUALITY TERTIARY EDUCATION**

The achievement of quality tertiary education requires the establishment of a well-coordinated and efficient system at the institutional level. An example of such a path that can lead to quality tertiary education has been depicted in Figure 1.

The path towards quality tertiary education begins and is sustained by good leadership and quality management. Good leadership and quality management are the primary elements in attaining quality tertiary education. Leadership sets out the vision, mission and value statements, and develops strategic and development plans as well as policies and procedures. Not only does leadership put these in place, they use them to make informed decisions needed to bring about the desired change. Typically, good leadership and quality management leads to setting good direction, keeping to such direction, managing change, acquiring the relevant resources and harnessing the enthusiasm, commitment and optimism among fellows in such a way that they lead to quick attainment of the vision, mission and value statements (Effah, 2014). Based on strategic and development plans and policies, leadership put in place the required infrastructure needed by staff and students to promote quality student engagement.

Student engagement is largely about the interaction between efforts, time and other resources that are invested by the institution in order to optimize students' experiences, improve students' learning outcomes, and the general performance and reputation of the institution (Bowden *et al.*, 2021). Kuh (2009) defined student engagement as "the time and effort students devote to



**Figure 1.** The path to quality tertiary education.

activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes ... and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683) [emphases not ours]. Kuh (2009) suggests that the student is the most active player in student engagement. While this is true, it is worth noting that students are not the precursor of the degree of student engagement. Quality student engagement originates from the institution itself. The structures, programs and policies the institution deliberately puts in place towards engaging students best predict the degree of student engagement. Perhaps this explains why HEFCE (2008) defined student engagement as "the process whereby institutions and sector bodies make a deliberate attempt to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience" (n.p.). The academic and non-academic sections of tertiary education institutions co-ordinate to provide students with a rich experience (Coates, 2007), which according to Trowler (2010) comprises "active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning community" (p.7). Trowler (2010) suggested that the involvement of students in deliberate activities and conditions that have the potential to bring about high-quality learning leads to quality student

engagement. The activities and conditions include; the extent to which students' learning is deeply challenged by institutional expectation and assessment, the extent to which students strive to construct knowledge, the degree and nature of the interaction between staff and students, the creation of a supportive learning environment and finally, the integration of entrepreneurship and employment-centered experiences into the curriculum.

Leadership provides an enabling environment for the promotion of shared responsibility and collaboration among staff and students. Collaboration and shared responsibility are fostered in a democratic environment. In democratic environments, leaders make the final decision only after considering the opinions, needs, and aspirations of members (Akpapere *et al.*, 2019). Members of the institution are therefore included in the decision-making process. A democratic environment promotes the exchange of ideas and accountability (Amanchukwu *et al.*, 2015). A democratic environment leads to high job satisfaction among staff and as a result, staff and students become very productive in whatever job is assigned to them. This happens because of two reasons; the decision-making skills of staff and students are developed, and so they can take the decision that are consistent with the overall goals of the institution and implement them. The second reason is that students and staff feel they are part

of something which is larger and meaningful and so are motivated to commit themselves to their roles without waiting for financial rewards.

Adequate qualified staff are needed to engage students in two ways. First, to provide support for students' learning. There should be workshop assistants, laboratory assistants, medical staff to run the clinic/hospital, councilors to provide academic and career guidance, security personnel to make students and staff safe, teaching assistants to manage tutorial sessions and provide remedial interventions to students and secretarial and administrative staff to manage administrative duties among others. Second, to engage students through active learning, interactive pedagogy and student-centered approaches to teaching and learning. These pedagogues promote critical thinking, collaboration, hinder the exhibition of timid tendencies in students, and encourage tolerance among students and staff. Besides these, they retain much of the information presented and are able to apply them later in life. Students learn little if the tertiary experience is mostly sitting in lecture halls to listen to lectures, take notes, complete quizzes/assignments at the convenience of the lecturer and then take end-of-semester-examination. Where student engagement is worthwhile, students are eager to return to the institution for further training or provide support for the institution's growth through the alumni association, and employers are always willing to employ graduates and offer scholarships to employees to go for further studies in such institutions.

Quality tertiary education prepares students to function in society as knowledgeable employees or employers. The ultimate focus of quality tertiary education is not to equip students with examination-passing skills. It is to prepare them for working life. Tertiary education institutions that seek to improve student engagement should hire blended professionals and employability and entrepreneurial strategies. Whitchurch (2009) defined blended professionals as "individuals who draw their identity from both professional and academic domains, and are, in effect, developing new forms of space between the two" (p. 2). Blended professionals have first-hand experience at the job market and are able to coach students to meet the demands of the job market (Whitchurch, 2009). As mentioned by Fitzgerald *et al.* (2016), not all knowledge and expertise reside in tertiary institutions, and both great learning opportunities in teaching and expertise reside in non-academic settings. Blended professionals are able to train students to understand current trends in industry and industry standards. The fact remains that where employability and entrepreneurship are considered key elements in the training, students are not bombarded with theories without drawing attention to their relevance to and application in practice. For example, the students who have studied the 'The Traditional Theory of Poetry' should write a 'captivating' poem as evidence that learning has taken place and not show understanding by only taking a quiz on the 'The Traditional Theory of Poetry'. Another way

of bridging the theory-practice divide is to have and operationalize student employability strategies. The strategies can include embedding entrepreneurship, internship and work placement in programs and courses to increase students' professional capabilities. To provide quality tertiary education, leadership must be concerned about harnessing resources to provide quality student engagement. When leadership and management become too concerned with wealth creation through numerical expansion it creates institutional massification.

## **FACTORS THAT NEGATIVELY AFFECT THE QUALITY OF TERTIARY EDUCATION**

### **Physical Infrastructure**

Shortages of public funds for the expansion of physical infrastructure have resulted in a disproportionate growth between student enrolment and physical infrastructure. Student population has outgrown the quality and quantity of physical infrastructure needed to produce well-educated graduates (Mve, 2021). Laboratories, offices for staff, lecture rooms and theaters are inadequate. Some staff share offices because there are fewer offices than staff and so staff are not able to effectively provide support to students learning beyond the lecture room/theater. Students uncomfortably squeeze themselves into lecture rooms/theaters designed to accommodate a much smaller number of students. In laboratory practical sessions, students are grouped to perform experiments and activities, offering only a small fraction of the opportunity to practice. The opportunity to extend reading beyond lecture notes is hampered by the existence of libraries that cannot accommodate up to 1% of the student population. Besides the low seating capacities of libraries, the libraries are stocked with old books and so students are not brought up to speed with current trends (Tlali *et al.*, 2019). These conditions negatively affect the quality of education because most public tertiary institutions have student enrollments that are two or more times beyond their carrying capacities.

### **Staffing**

Poorly regulated massification results in understaffing. Many tertiary institutions are unable to recruit additional staff due to inadequate funds and in some rare cases unavailability of qualified candidates to meet the demands of the increased student population (Matovu, 2018; Ogunode and Musa, 2020). The highest staff-student ratio (SSR) norm is capped at 1:27. However, at the institutional level SSR is much higher. Some departments can have SSR of 1:50 or more. The most immediate effect of high SSR is increased workload. The worse affected are the academic staff who have administrative responsibilities.

Academic staff, in tertiary education institutions, who have enough time devoted to research are few and graduate output at the post-graduate level is also low. A Ph.D. candidate can spend six years or more on a program, which should have taken four years to complete if the candidate does not succumb to frustration and abandon the program. Since there are inadequate staff, student engagement is weak and so the overall learning experience satisfaction is poor (Pillay, 2020).

### Student engagement

The negative effect of massification on quality tertiary education cut across all aspects of student engagement (Boutarti *et al.*, 2022). It is widely known that student engagement is a proxy for quality tertiary education (Kuh, 2007). The value of student engagement cannot be questioned. After all, there cannot be quality tertiary education if tertiary education students are poorly engaged. With the large student numbers, it is becoming increasingly difficult for students to be engaged in a manner that induces the acquisition of professional skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, coaching and mentoring by staff, social and academic integration and support for weaker students. Student-faculty interaction has been reduced to 'active lecturer, passive students' (Chhetri and Baniya, 2022). The students sit in a crowded room listening to a lecturer's voice-over speaker, take notes and get ready to take the next quiz or examination that contains items set in a fashion that it can be graded easily. Class discussions are limited to a few extroverts and front-row seaters with the rest doing what they came to do, listening and taking notes. Unless students are 'active' in lessons, it will be difficult to learn to think critically, solve problems and verbally articulate his/her ideas publicly. As noted by Hornsby and Osman (2014), large classes decrease the intensity of interaction between students and lecturers because it reinforces deductive teaching styles. Opportunities for the practical sessions are turned into opportunities for observation because practical sessions are conducted in large groups. While one pair of hands is active, the rest are idle. In the end, the graduate is retrained by the employer to handle equipment and task he/she should have known after years of educational training in the hands of an educationist whose job is to prepare students for life and work.

### Student mobility

Where there is unregulated massification, there is excessive student mobility. Students tend to move to places where they perceive they can receive quality tertiary education. African countries including Ghana have suffered from student mobility. Student mobility has favored countries that have committed financial resources to regulate massification and therefore have minimized the

negative impact of massification on quality. The United State Embassy (2017) in Ghana reported that in the 2016/2017 academic year some 37,735 Africans were studying in tertiary education institutions in the USA alone. This figure shows a 7% increase over the previous academic year. The number of Ghanaians studying in the United States of America alone is estimated at 3,111. Tertiary Education Institutions in developed countries are preferred by the social elite in Africa because of their superior infrastructure, student engagement, and the guarantee that graduation will not be delayed.

### CONCLUSION

From the clients' perspective, tertiary education can be described as quality if it leads to the production of graduates who are fit for purpose. Quality tertiary education is one that produces knowledgeable graduates who are able to cope with the complexities of work processes and contribute to the organization of society. It is driven by good leadership and quality management. Leadership and management have to set the stage for the process of achieving quality tertiary education to begin and sustain the process by harnessing human and material resources for the purpose of meaningfully engaging students. Leadership provides the physical infrastructure, recruits qualified staff, operationalizes sound employability and entrepreneurship strategies, and creates a democratic environment to promote accountability and productivity. At the heart of quality tertiary education is good student engagement. Student engagement is the time, effort and resources the institution consciously invests in order to improve students' learning and optimize their experiences. The major obstacle to quality tertiary education is unregulated massification. By opening up access to tertiary education to all who qualify rather than a privileged few, tertiary education institutions have seen a dramatic increase in enrollment, with many institutions traversing their carrying capacities. While massification has improved access and equity, it has put pressure on physical infrastructure and staff and reduced the quality of student engagement.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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