



## Educational Process: International Journal

ISSN: 2147-0901 | e-ISSN: 2564-8020 | [www.edupij.com](http://www.edupij.com)

**Educational Process International Journal • Volume 9 • Issue 1 • 2020**

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**Edward Kigozi**

**To cite this article:** Kigozi, E. (2020). Quality Assurance Practices Applied in PTTCs: Listening to the Student Teachers' Voice Through Focus Group Discussion. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 9(1), 23-42.

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2020.91.2>

**Edward Kigozi**, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. (e-mail: [s1119886@s.eduhk.hk](mailto:s1119886@s.eduhk.hk))

## Quality Assurance Practices Applied in PTTCs: Listening to the Student Teachers' Voice Through Focus Group Discussion

EDWARD KIGOZI

### Abstract

Ensuring the quality of education is the major concern affecting all tertiary and higher education institutions in Uganda, including Primary Teacher Training colleges (PTTCs). The primary aim of the current study was to provide the students' perspective on quality assurance (QA) practices applied in Uganda's PTTCs. The study applied a qualitative research design based on focus group discussion. Four PTTCs were purposively selected, which were Buloba (BLK), Ggaba (GBK), which are both private PTTCs; and Kibuli (KIB) and Rakai (RBK), which are both public PTTCs. The study identified "continuous improvement," "accreditation," "self-evaluation," "external examinations," and "student involvement in QA" as the QA practices applied in Uganda's PTTCs. Furthermore, the study also revealed several challenges to the successful implementation of QA in PTTCs, which were "negative attitude towards quality assurance," "lack of skilled manpower regarding QA," "improper communication," and "lack of financial resources for QA implementation." The study concluded that although this research was limited to primary teacher training institutions in Uganda's educational setting, and on an interpretative qualitative paradigm, it is anticipated that the study's findings will provide an understanding on the QA practices implemented in Uganda's PTTCs through listening to the students as the primary stakeholders of primary teacher education.

**Keywords:** Quality assurance practices, primary teacher training colleges (PTTCs), student teachers' voice.



DOI: 10.22521/edupij.2020.91.2

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EDUPIJ • ISSN 2147-0901 • e-ISSN 2564-8020

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## Introduction

With an anticipated increase in the number of student teachers worldwide from 100 million in 2000 to a projected 263 million by 2025, coupled with the ever-expanding globalization and marketization of education, ensuring the quality of teacher education is one of the major investment areas in ensuring the quality and expected standards of education provision in both the developing and the developed world (Abdel-Karim & Helou, 2013; Ingvarson & Rowley, 2017). Due to the aforementioned factors, issues such as mobility of students, distance education, use of technology in education, virtual education, and the introduction of cost-sharing and privatization in education have all been witnessed. All these have led to a growing need and demand for quality assurance (QA) in various educational institutions as well as in teacher education institutions. Ensuring quality and standards in teacher education institutions requires the effective implementation of QA practices and processes. As such, several processes to ensure the quality of teaching and learning in teacher education institutions have been implemented, and some of these include “accreditation,” “quality assessment,” “use of performance indicators” and “self-evaluation.” These QA processes have been prescribed within various QA frameworks and by QA agencies in general across in various countries worldwide. Although it is believed that QA is an important tool for teacher education institutions and other tertiary education institutions so as to achieve academic excellence, implementing QA practices to ensure the quality of academic programs in meeting both local and international standards is still considered a challenge, especially in developing countries (Kahsay, 2012; Ryan, 2015; Schomaker, 2015).

In Uganda, whose primary teacher education system consists of 52 Primary Teacher Training colleges (PTTCs) of which 45 are public and 7 are private, implementing QA is based on the guidelines and policies of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and the Ministry of Education and Sports. Private PTTCs apply for accreditation after conducting a self-evaluation process, which is then followed by an external evaluation by the NCHE and the Ministry of Education and Sports. Like any other private tertiary institution, in addition to accreditation, they also implement other procedures and practices such as peer reviews, quality assessments, performance indicators, and quality audits (Bisaso, 2010; Kasozi, 2006).

On the other hand, public PTTCs are not required to seek accreditation as they receive automatic accreditation by the state under an Act of Parliament. However, they implement other QA processes such as internal quality assessments, performance indicators, internal evaluation, and quality audits. Since QA is a relatively new phenomenon which comes with associated costs, its implementation is not yet fully understood by both staff or management at various PTTCs, hence it presents a considerable challenge.

The main purpose of the current study is to provide a detailed students’ perspective on QA practices applied in Uganda’s PTTCs, and the challenges faced by these institutions whilst implementing QA practices, through performing an inquiry of the primary stakeholder; student teachers enrolled at PTTCs. The results of the study could help educational leaders, policymakers, and parents alike to understand how PTTCs implement QA practices, and the challenges that they face, through listening to student teacher’s opinions through a focus group discussion. It is anticipated that the study’s findings could provide suggestions as how to achieve a better quality of education in Uganda’s PTTCs.

### *Research Questions*

- What quality assurance practices are applied in Uganda's Primary Teacher Training Colleges?
- What are the challenges to the successful implementation of quality assurance practices in Uganda's Primary Teacher Training Colleges?

### *Review of Related Literature*

This section presents the views published by other scholars on the concept of quality, quality assurance, and the challenges faced in the successful implementation of QA within educational institutions.

### *Concept of Quality*

The concept of quality is perceived as an indistinct concept (Maniku, 2012), as a relative and absolute concept (Sallis, 2014), and also as a multifaceted concept (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002; Harvey, 2006). All these views depict quality as meaning different things to different people. Much has been contemplated about how to define the concept of quality, but a broad review of the literature published in the area of quality assurance revealed that Di Biase and Maniku (2019), Essel, Boakye-Yiadom, and Kyeremeh (2018), Geda (2014), Kabsay (2012), and Waheed, (2013) all documented that no real consensus or clarity exists about the concept of quality in higher education. Referring to the diverse attempts to define the concept of quality in higher education, Harvey and Green (1993) suggested five substantive perspectives of how quality is perceived in preference to a singular all-encompassing concrete definition. These are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Perceptions of Quality in Higher Education

<i>Definition</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Emphasis</i>
<i>Exceptional</i>	Quality is regarded as something that is distinctive and exclusive in nature.	Recruiting exceptionally excellent students to achieve this perspective of quality.
<i>Fitness for purpose</i>	Quality is seen in terms of education fulfilling its aims and objectives.	Effectiveness of the teaching and learning process to ensure that learners' needs are met.
<i>Value for money</i>	Quality is seen in terms of return on investment.	Producing more graduates at a lower cost.
<i>Transformation</i>	Quality as change from one level to another with enhancement and development of new knowledge.	Fundamental change in learners' achievement of competences and skills.
<i>Perfection</i>	Quality as being of high degree of perfection or zero defects.	The teaching and learning process should occur without errors.

Source: Harvey and Green (1993) and modified by the researcher

In Table 1, the various perceptions of quality in higher education are further illustrated. For example, the notion of quality as being exceptional requires aggressive educational strategies that focus on forming educational institutions that are high-ranking in terms of their academic performance, by recruiting exceptionally excellent students into their

academic programs. Based on this view of quality, this would not be readily achievable in the context of Uganda's PTTCs, as many students see these programs as a "last resort" after failing to gain enrolment offers elsewhere.

On the other hand, quality as fitness for purpose sees education as fulfilling its aims and objectives. This way of thinking about quality has been promoted by most quality assurance frameworks in most countries, as well as being embraced within the mission statements of many educational institutions. Similarly, the QA framework for tertiary and higher education in Uganda looks at quality as ensuring fitness for purpose. This is also the primary aim of the PTTCs, as they ensure to fulfil their purpose of training competent primary school teachers who are equipped and able to teach children with passion and diligence.

Consequently, the perspective of quality as "value for money" targets outcomes obtained that are based on investment in education. Such a view of quality emphasizes that educational institutions should produce more graduates and at a lower cost. While this perception is viable in monetary terms, and well-promoted by policymakers and the relevant funding agencies, it may not fit well in the context of Uganda's PTTCs, who may lean more towards favoring quantity of newly trained teachers over their quality, hence compromising the quality of primary teacher education and education in general. Looking at quality perfection, all educational institutions aim to achieve perfection in their academic programs, but this requires a process without errors which still cannot be achieved in many educational institutions such as PTTCs in a developing country like Uganda.

As to the view of quality as transformation, emphasis has been placed on seeing students meet prescribed levels of skills and competences. As this point, the students are central to the teaching and learning process; enabling them to participate in ensuring the quality of their learning. This school of thought has been promoted by several QA agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and other higher education institutions in developing countries. Although, it is not stated in the context of Uganda's PTTCs, many institutions' teaching and learning processes place the learner at the center, ensuring that they attain the required skills and competencies that will help to make them better primary school teachers in the future. However, the researcher of the current study believes that the views on quality as suggested by Harvey and Green (1993) can be best applied within educational institutions in order to cater for the various perceptions put forward by the diverse set of stakeholders in today's education.

#### *Concept of Quality Assurance*

Having briefly considered the concept of quality in higher education, this section looks at the various scholarly viewpoints on quality assurance. Recently, most educational institutions have been concerned entirely with ensuring the quality of education, but with little emphasis on what happens to the quality after the teaching process. It is therefore imperative to assure, maintain and improve the attained levels of quality, hence the notion of quality enhancement has emerged. Thus, in most countries, the concept of QA and enhancement has been used interchangeably, or at least combined. Similar to quality, QA in higher education can yield different meanings and views to different people. A summary of some of the definitions of QA put forward in the contemporary literature are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Definitions of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

<i>Author</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Emphasis</i>
Harvey (2007)	A process of instituting stakeholders' confidence that the provision of education meets the stakeholders' expectations and measures up to the required criteria.	Instilling confidence, provision of education meets the expectations of stakeholders and measures up to the threshold standards.
Centrex (2004)	The means by which an organization confirms that conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by the training organization.	Ensuring conditions in place for students to achieve standards set by the educational institutions.
Woodhouse (1999)	Policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced.	Policies and procedures that are aimed at enhancing quality of education.
INQAAHE (2005, as cited by Kahsay, 2012)	All the attitudes, objects, actions and procedures, which through their existence and use, and together with quality control activities, ensure that appropriate academic standards are being maintained and enhanced in and by each program.	Procedures which ensure appropriate academic standards are being enhanced in academic programs.

Source: Kahsay (2012) and modified by the researcher

From Table 2, it can be observed that definitions place differing emphasis in an attempt to provide an understanding of the concept of QA in higher education. Whilst some definitions focus on the meeting of standards, others talk about the procedures and policies put forward to ensure that a certain quality of education is attained. Accordingly, understanding the concept of QA depends significantly on the aim that QA is supposed to fulfil within the educational institution. In the context of Uganda's PTTCs, QA is defined according to the NCHE, as the process of ensuring that education attains its purpose. This is therefore not that far removed from the definitions provided in Table 2. For instance, PTTCs ensure that education attains its aim by implementing the required policies, procedures, legal frameworks, by having the necessary resources and infrastructure, and by involving all stakeholders in the process.

#### *Quality Assurance Practices*

After looking at the concept of quality and quality assurance, this section presents the processes and practices implemented to ensure quality of education under the areas of "accreditation," "quality audit," "continuous assessment," "external examination," "self-evaluation," and "student evaluation of teaching."

#### *Accreditation*

Scholars have defined accreditation in different ways. For instance, Hayward (2006) defined accreditation as a self-study and external review used by higher education to

examine colleges, universities, and higher education programs for the purposes of quality assurance and enhancement. According to Harman and Meek (2000), accreditation is defined as a process of assessment and evaluation through which an educational course or institution is recognized or certified as meeting a prescribed standard as stated by the accrediting agency. Accreditation involves self-evaluation and internal quality audit, followed by external review and audit, and then finally to rejection or acceptance of the higher education institution's accreditation application (Howard, 2006). Scholars such as Sywelem (2009) pointed out that its role is to ensure and enhance quality of education.

In addition to these views, accreditation promotes institutional autonomy, academic freedom, quality efficiency of the educational processes, and the commitment of both management and staff to student learning (Geda, 2015; Maniku, 2008). In the context of Uganda's PTTCs, a similar process of accreditation occurs as outlined by Howard (2006), but this occurs only in the private PTTCs rather than the public PTTCs, which are already state accredited by law. Here, the process places more emphasis on the required minimum standards, improvement, continuous reevaluation of the teaching and learning process, and less on experimentation.

#### *Quality audit*

According to Drennan (2000), quality audit can be defined as the logical and autonomous investigation conducted by experts in order to determine whether or not quality actions and related outcomes are in line with the planned arrangements, are implemented effectively, and suited to the achievement of the set objectives. On the other hand, Hayward (2006) defined quality audit as a process of review of an institution or program so as to determine whether or not its curriculum, staff, and infrastructure meet its stated aims and objectives.

From the definitions presented by the scholars, it is clear that quality audit is an evaluative process that compares what an institution does with what is required according to that stated by a QA framework or policy. Like other tertiary education institutions, Uganda's PTTCs conduct quality audit using performance indicators set by the Ministry of Education and Sports upon which they are audited in their quest for QA and enhancement. Harvey and Green (1993) pointed out that performance indicators promote continuous improvement, monitor efficiency and effectiveness in management, teaching and processes as well as in the performance of individual staff and the institution in general.

#### *Continuous assessment*

There is consensus among scholars and educationists that continuous assessment has been recognized as a fundamental part of everyday classroom instruction and a vital practice to ensure quality teaching and learning as well as the quality of education (Abejehu, 2016; Adebawale & Alao, 2008; Samson & Allida, n.d.). In addition, Samson and Allida (2018) contended that continuous assessment has been cited in the drive to ensure the quality of education. While adding to the opinions of previous scholars, Hernández (2012) and Abejehu (2016) explained that continuous assessment is conducted through *assessment for learning* in which teachers investigate how much their students know, what they can do, and what confusions, preconceptions, or knowledge gaps they encounter; *assessment of learning* in which teachers apply it to certify learning and to report on students' progress in school to their parents through indicating the students' relative position in the school compared to their peers, and is usually conducted at the end of a course unit, topic, grade, or program;

*assessment as learning* which includes students as contributors to the assessment, learning process and as a link between them. Furthermore, added to these means in which continuous assessment is conducted, other purposes include: improvement of the teaching and learning process and motivating students to work harder, and therefore its success can also be measured in terms of the opportunities it provides for educational quality enhancement (Abejehu, 2016; Amedeker, 2014).

Accordingly, every educational institution, including PTTCs, in Uganda, and irrespective of its educational level, apply continuous assessment as a key to determining students' learning achievement and to identify their learning difficulties so as to consider the provision of special support, to improve teacher's pedagogical practices, and to improve the quality of education in general. In line with this, Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports, through the NCHE, proposed continuous assessment in academic and practical subjects as a practice to ensure the quality of teaching and learning through ascertaining the all-round profile of students at all levels.

#### *External examination*

External examinations are used as gauges that register achievement deemed critical to students' success, and also as required to further their academic studies or to seek employment after leaving school (Abejehu, 2016; Rind & Mari, 2019; Vlaardingerbroek & Taylor, 2009). External examinations are prepared by a group of experts outside the faculty of the school or higher education institution, and are administered by a national examination board or other recognized examining body. Although examination are set by the external board, in most cases the papers are marked by teachers from higher education institutions. This system ensures that the students and the program abide by the prescribed standards of quality (Krečič & Grmek, 2010; Szanto, 2005). In addition, external examinations are seen as important in the maintenance of uniform standards at the end of a certain stage of academic learning, and provides the basis for choices made at the secondary stage and in creating incentives for better teaching and learning. In addition to the importance attached to external examinations, they also influence the process of teaching and learning in educational institutions, since their performance is also inextricably linked to their institutional success outcomes (Aworanti, 2011; Duvie & Eluwa, 2016).

Although external exterminations are deemed as critically important to preparing students for their future career life, they may also be seen to threaten teachers' professional control, such as deskilling their evaluative function, enforcing a centralized curriculum, removing teachers' rights to evaluate the outcome of their own activities, and introducing new and perhaps inappropriate measures of teacher efficacy (Carless, 2007; Noonan & Duncan, 2005; Runte, 1998).

In Uganda's higher education context, students enrolled at PTTCs undertake external examinations at the end of each academic year. These end-of-year examinations also act as promotional examinations for first year students and final examinations for second-year students. This is in line with the QA framework for tertiary and higher education institutions, which requires that students should be informed of their examinations and accompanying regulations pertinent to their grading system, and the period in which the examinations are to be conducted.

### *Self-evaluation*

Self-evaluation is an institutional process conducted by the faculty members of higher education institutions, and is aimed at assessing the progress of the teaching and learning process and its outcomes, diagnosing problems that exist within an institution, or when preparing for external inspection, quality audit, or for accreditation (Di Biase & Maniku, 2019; Muresan, 2009). According to a literature review conducted by Muresan (2009), self-evaluation can be categorized as one of two types. First, there is *individual self-evaluation*, which is performed by staff members of an institution and is usually an associated or supplementary action to processes such as action research, lesson or classroom observation, or peer review as part of an exercise in participative evaluation or a professional development process within a teacher training program. Second, there is *institutional-level self-evaluation*, which is initiated by the school or college in order to facilitate continuous improvement of the institution's teaching and learning process.

In supporting individual self-evaluation, Martin and Stella (2007) further clarified that the self-assessment process generally involves faculty members working together with administrators in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their respective departments, as well as for identifying the causes of possible shortcomings through applying the evaluative process known as Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis.

In the context of Uganda's PTTCs, self-assessment processes are conducted at both the individual and institutional levels. For privately operated PTTCs these evaluations are conducted as preparatory to external quality audits and accreditation, whilst public PTTCs conduct such evaluations as preparatory to quality audits and assessments.

### *Student evaluation of teaching*

With students considered the major stakeholders of educational institutions, their opinions about the teaching and learning process are vital in ensuring and enhancing the quality of education. As such, *student evaluation of teaching* (SETs) has been included as a key factor to the quality agenda with regards to attaining quality through the demonstration and maintenance of institutional performance and effectiveness in the teaching and learning process (Thielsch, Brinkmüller, & Forthmann, 2018). In addition, Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans (2013) contended that, student evaluation of teaching is a major practice in assessing teaching quality through collecting, analyzing and interpreting data from students, and in providing feedback to individual teachers in order that they may improve in the carrying out of their professional duties. Citing the literature of Kember, Leung, and Kwan (2002), Spooren et al. (2013) explained that SETs fulfil the roles of improving the quality of teaching, offer inputs for staff appraisal exercises, and demonstrate adequate procedures for ensuring the quality of teaching and learning processes.

While supporting the works of previous scholars, Hornstein (2017) pointed out that in order to strengthen the aforementioned roles, students should be able to freely air their experiences through SETs about their courses, instructors, course content, and the availability of their instructor for consultation outside of class time, with the aim to improve the quality of teaching and education in general. Since students are the primary recipients of academic instruction, they evaluate teaching effectiveness grounded on their perceptions and experiences, and hence are positioned to provide meaningful feedback to both their instructors and the upper management of the educational institution. Although students are

vital in the process of ensuring instructional quality, they have also been criticized as being unreliable and biased, and the process may encourage some students to place total responsibility for the quality of their education on their instructors rather than themselves (Boring, Ottoboni, & Stark, 2016; Bunge, 2018).

#### *Challenges to successful implementation of QA*

In addition to looking at QA practices implemented within educational institutions, challenges to the successful implementation of QA practices must also be considered. As quality assurance involves several issues such as monitoring, accountability, and evaluation in enhancing the purpose of QA, at the same time it necessitates integrating the perspective of different stakeholders, and is thereby liable to several challenges.

A number of studies have been conducted in order to investigate the various challenges encountered in the implementation of QA within educational institutions. Altman, Schwegler, and Bunkowski (2014) conducted a study to investigate faculty beliefs and their plans to participate in peer QA reviews using the a quality matters rubric. Through a qualitative approach, the findings of their study indicated that the major challenges facing QA were founded on the attitude and perception of faculty members regarding the QA process of peer review, the creation of a quality culture, and the application of digital learning and technology integration in quality assurance. In another study, Okwakol (2008) examined the challenges faced by African universities and national quality assurance bodies in ensuring quality. Through a review of the published literature, Okwakol's study reported that the major challenges facing QA in African universities were the rapid expansion of universities, their infrastructural inadequacies, lack of facilities and up-to-date instructional materials, as well as obsolete and often non-existent equipment, outdated curricula, and limited financial resources and administrative support. The study argued that most QA systems, processes and practices were imported from developed countries, and that developing countries should themselves develop QA mechanisms of their own that better reflect their own specific country needs and context.

In another study, Sang and Ahn (2014) examined the challenges facing the effective implementation of regional QA of cross-border higher education through qualitative review and document analysis. Their study identified QA challenges to cross-border education as a lack of roles played by students, professionals, and academic bodies in ensuring quality, lack of similarity across the education system and meaning of quality in collaborating countries, lack of national accrediting agencies across bordering countries, cheating and unreliability of data about institutional activities and programs among member institutions, and the liberalization of policies having resulted in the proliferation of higher education institutions, especially those privately operated, leading to reduced quality education being offered.

Zavale, Santos, and da Conceição Dias (2016) conducted a study to investigate the features and challenges faced when implementing an Internal Quality Assurance system within African higher education institutions. Through a review of the literature, their study found that the major challenges in implementing an Internal Quality Assurance system with African higher education institutions are associated with linking QA to decision-making and to funding strategies, training human resources and funds allocating for such a system, enabling the system to be assimilated across the university community, and defining measurable and objective quality standards to enable unbiased performance classification.

Using a descriptive survey design, Mureithi (2012) conducted a study aimed at establishing the constraints facing QA and standards officials in supporting curriculum implementation in public secondary schools in Nyandrua County, Kenya. The study's findings indicated that teachers' attitudes, teachers' cooperation, ineffective curriculum supervision by administrators, lack of teachers' commitment, inadequate facilities and resources, failure by teachers to wholly implement recommendations made by Quality Assurance Safety Observers (QASOs) in curriculum implementation, inadequate funding allocated to support QASO activities, inadequate staff to carry out QASO duties, limited training for QASOs to improve service delivery skills, reliance upon District Education Offices in terms of facilitation, inadequate capacity-building for QASOs and lack of access to policy documents to support curriculum implementation in schools, and inadequacy of QASO staff and resources.

While aiming at evaluating the challenges of QA in fashion higher education in Ghana, Pongo, Asare, and Abdul-Fatahi (2015) conducted a study using a sample of 100 participants from four higher education institutions. Their findings indicated that poor quality of educational input, process, and output, the unavailability of resources due to increasing student population, and the absence of well-planned curriculum design and review processes were the major challenges to QA in Ghanaian fashion higher education.

Odhiambo (2014) conducted a study to examine the critical issues and challenges facing Kenya's public higher education in its struggles with the QA mechanisms. With in-depth interviews and document analysis, the outcomes of the study identified the challenges were identified as inadequate funding, the rapid expansion of higher education in Kenya, ensuring the quality of increasing open distance education and the autonomy of universities, as granted under law prior to the QAA and continuing since.

From the studies examined, the challenges identified are generally based on the resistance of staff, inadequate funding and resources, lack of adequate curriculum supervision, and the poor allocation of resources. However, the studies conducted were out of context for Uganda's PTTCs, hence the current study's aim to investigate those challenges and barriers specific to the successful implementation of QA in Uganda's PTTCs.

## **Methodology**

The current study applied a qualitative design using focus group discussion. A total of four PTTCs were purposively selected for the study, namely Buloba (BLK) and Ggaba (GBK) as private PTTCs, and Kibuli (KIB) and Rakai (RBK) as public PTTCs. Focus group discussions were conducted with student teachers from the four selected colleges who were in their final year of study. In total, four focus group discussions were held with a total of 20 student teachers in each group. The application of focus group discussions as a method to collect data is regarded as being highly productive, appropriate, relevant, and engaging for the participants in their natural setting. In the current study, the focus group discussions aimed to elicit student teachers' views, feelings and perceptions on the issue of QA practices and implementations within their respective colleges. The choice of employing focus group discussions was also underscored on the premise that they would provide a better level of understanding as to the implementation of QA practices as the main actors in the learning process, as well to understand the challenges encountered from student teachers in their own words.

Data captured from the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, and then coded, analyzed thematically and finally categorized according to the research questions of the study. This process helped the researcher to identify the initial concepts, and then to develop the codes, group conceptual constructs, and finally to analyze the trends evident in the data. Coding, categorizing, and themes were arrived at through content analysis of the transcribed interviews, and the process involved the iterative reading of the interview transcripts, identifying initial concepts, developing codes representing evocative attributes for recurrent concepts, categorizing related codes, and the developing and grouping of conceptual constructs or themes as recommended by Miles and Huberman (2004) and Saldana (2009).

## Results

This section presents issues revealed by the current study in relation to the implementation of quality assurance practices in four Ugandan PTTCs.

The emerging themes are listed in Table 3 and Table 4, and also detailed in the text, along with excerpts taken from the focus group transcripts added as examples. Pseudonyms have been used in order not to identify the respondent by name whose words form the excerpt. In addition, other respondents who responded similarly are listed. The three letters of the pseudonym denote the PTTC (e.g., RBK: Rakai), followed by the respondent's assigned number in the data analysis.

### *Quality Assurance Practices*

Based on the thematic analysis of the focus group discussion data, in the form of transcribed interview records, major themes from the categorization and combining of emergent themes related to QA practices are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Themes Related to Quality Assurance Practices

Research Question 1	Themes
What quality assurance practices are applied in Uganda's Primary Teacher Training Colleges?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Institutional quality audit</li> <li>2. Continuous assessment</li> <li>3. Student evaluation of teaching</li> <li>4. External examination</li> <li>5. Accreditation</li> <li>6. Self-evaluation</li> </ol>

### *Theme 1: Institutional quality audit*

**\*\*Text missing \*\***

### *Theme 2: Continuous assessment*

Continuous assessment has been used as a tool to enable continuous learning and the discovery of new knowledge, as well as improving academic performance and quality. Regarding this, one focus group mentioned that:

There is a process of continuous assessment in our college in which we, the students, are assessed in different ways such as giving us weekly assignments, start-of-term examinations, and midterm examinations. These prompt us though to go to the library to research, and even the tutors help us to discuss among ourselves in groups. [RBK003; KIB004]

*Theme 3: Student evaluation of teaching*

Quality assurance practices improve students' learning, especially when all stakeholders such as the management, teaching staff and students are involved, and each are committed to QA development and implementation.

This was witnessed by some of the respondents, as shown in this example:

As students, we are told that we are responsible for our own learning, and because of this we are mandated to fill out a questionnaire survey to give feedback to the management about the teaching and learning process to improve the quality of education. [GBK001; RBK005; KIB; BLB009]

Similarly other respondents mentioned that:

We are involved as student teachers on how the college is progressing each month or term with surveys from the principal, tutors and various administrators. We discuss how things are running at the school; where there is a weakness we come up with a way forward, and where there is a strength we can promote it. [GBK002; KIB005; RBK007; BLB002]

*Theme 4: External examination*

External examinations are regarded as one of the main processes of ensuring quality in the PTTCs. In their discussion, four of the respondents mentioned the following about external examinations:

As a way of ensuring quality, our college is affiliated to external examinations organized by Kyambogo University, and include regional-level mocks and final examinations administered by external examiners who assess and mark them, and then send the results without knowing who we are. This helps bolster our confidence in that we have achieved the required competences that will make us into high quality teachers. [GBK002; RBK007; KIB002; BLB005]

On this topic, some other respondents further mentioned that:

Before we qualify as teachers, we must sit a national examination, which is set and marked by external examiners at the end of each year. External examinations are sat by both first year and final year students, and without passing them one can't become a teacher. [GBK003; RBK005; BLB001]

*Theme 5: Accreditation*

As in many countries, accreditation is a process whereby an institution or its programs are recognized as meeting the accepted standards to be offered at either tertiary or higher education institutions. Accreditation is not a requisite for public PTTCs because they were established under an Act of Parliament, giving them a certain level of autonomy in their governance and quality assurance.

Private PTTCs, on the other hand, are required to submit to a licensing and accreditation process (National Council for Higher Education, 2006). On this, one respondent mentioned that:

In one of our meetings, the principal mentioned that as our PTTC was privately operated, it is mandated to undergo accreditation and must be approved by the NCHE and the Ministry of Education and Sports to gain the license to operate. [GBK001]

Another respondent also mentioned that:

Last year we were told by the management that we were preparing to renew our license, and that we were requested to participate in the process by filling out some survey questionnaires and should be prepared to be interviewed by Ministry of Education and Sports officials and those from the NCHE. [GBK007]

Furthermore, one respondent added that:

Yes, true, our college has undergone a process of accreditation and I myself witnessed a period of tension among the tutors and the upper management, where they both had to work extra hours in the day as well as preparing some students who were to participate in the process. [BLB005]

When the researcher asked students from public PTTCs about the process of accreditation, this is what some of them mentioned in response:

I have never seen such a process being applied in our college, although we do receive officials from the Ministry who inspect our college. [RBK039]

Another student mentioned that:

Our college has never conducted such a process, although I don't know the reason why, and also I haven't see the word 'license' as written on the signposts of the private colleges. Maybe I will ask the principal of our college about it. [KIB007]

#### *Theme 6: Self-evaluation*

According to one focus group, their college conducted self-evaluation in order to constantly improve the teaching and learning process. One of the respondents mentioned that:

Our college conducts self-evaluation every year so as to identify areas of strength and weakness that require improvement. In this way, we able to achieve the quality of teaching and learning and hence quality of education. [GBK006]

Other respondents also added that:

Given the chance for our college to undertake self-evaluation has enabled it to regularly implement suggested improvements, and we now realize that the quality of teaching and learning as well as the education has improved greatly. [GBK004: BLB001]

#### *Challenges to successful QA practices implementation in Ugandan PTTCs*

When compared to other tertiary and higher education institutions in other parts of the world, the implementation of quality assurance practices in Uganda's PTTCs is still in its infancy, and thus often antagonized by certain challenges and barriers.

Based on the thematic analysis of the focus group discussion data, in the form of transcribed interview records, major themes from the categorization and combining of emergent themes related to challenges to successful QA practices implementation are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Themes for Challenges to Successful QA Practices Implementation

Research Question 2	Themes
What are the challenges to the successful implementation of quality assurance practices in Uganda's Primary Teacher Training Colleges?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Negative attitude towards QA</li> <li>2. Lack of skilled manpower for QA implementation</li> <li>3. Improper communication</li> <li>4. Lack of financial resources for QA implementation</li> </ol>

*Theme 1: Negative attitude towards QA*

Data analysis from the focus group discussion also showed that the implementation of QA practices suffers from negative attitudes from the college community, and particularly from the tutors. Some of the respondents mentioned that:

Tutors in our college look at quality assurance as a mission to detect their faults. They see the Student Coordinators who give assistance to the Director of Studies (who also doubles as the Quality Assurance Officer) as agents who report whatever mistake they do in class in our weekly reports about the teaching and learning process. [RBK011; BLK001]

*Theme 2: Lack of skilled manpower for QA implementation*

Data from the student teacher focus group discussions showed that both the tutors and students involved in QA implementation are not well-trained in the implementation of QA processes. Furthermore, they are barely assisted in their continuous drive to advance the skills in QA processes and implementation. In other words, there is no clear mechanism for the training, supervision and coaching of tutors working on QA within the PTTCs. As a case in point, one focus group respondent explained that:

Our college doesn't receive enough assistance from the Ministry of Education and Sports, yet it is a public PTTC. We are only told that we must fill in some questionnaire and then submit it. When we ask about its importance, we are just told that it is from the Ministry of Education and Sports. [RBK007; KIB002; BLK007]

*Theme 3: Improper communication*

While maintaining dialogue with the student teachers in the focus group discussions, it was indicated that proper communication regarding QA processes and implementation is still seen as an obstacle.

Concerning this issue, one of the student teachers stated that:

There is a lack of well-organized communication regarding the conveying of information regarding the progress of quality assurance from the Ministry of Education and Sports to the students, and even to our parents or other stakeholders. [RBK008; BLK006]

*Theme 4: Lack of financial resources for QA implementation*

The majority of focus group respondents voiced that implementing QA practices is a complex process, and can be financially demanding for the PTTC's management. Regarding this, the respondents mentioned that:

Financial issues, in that at the national level and institutional level there is a lack of money or capital to build infrastructures, like when you go to the institutions you may find

poorly-funded projects. In the institutions, there is a lack of resources, and that lack of money leads to a lack of resources in the institution. [GBK002; KIB004; RBK010; BLK007]

The preceding discussion shows that the PTTCs are committed to implementing QA practices, and consider it as the major basis for the improvement of teaching and learning, and for enhancing the quality of education as a whole.

## Discussion

The primary aim of the current study was to identify the quality assurance practices applied in Uganda's PTTCs, and the challenges faced when implementing QA practices from the students' perspective through employment of focus group discussions.

### *Quality Assurance Practices Applied in PTTCs*

The PTTCs are involved in conducting internal and external QA practices in order to identify the different QA areas so as to ensure that the colleges continuously transform themselves and thereby improve their academic and institutional performance. While discussing the QA practices implemented in the PTTCs, the findings were categorized into internal and external QA practices. In terms of internal quality assurance practices, these are institutional quality audit, continuous assessment, academic meetings, student evaluation of teaching, and self-evaluation. While the external quality assurance practices are external examinations, and accreditation.

### *Internal Quality Assurance Practices*

With regards to internal quality assurance practices, Harvey and Green (1993) asserted that the aim of implementing QA practices is to ensure that there are mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure and enhance the quality of teaching and learning, as well as for it to be provided according to a prescribed level of quality. Each of these are discussed as follows.

#### *Institutional quality audit*

*\*\*Text missing\*\**

#### *Continuous assessment*

The student teachers reported that they are assessed by way of continuous tests, assignments, start-of-term examinations, practical projects, and end-of-term examinations. As in other tertiary education institutions, ensuring the quality of education in PTTCs also involves processes of continuous assessment conducted in certain categories, with *assessment of learning*, which emphasizes what the students know and can do; *assessment of learning*, which looks at students' academic progress; *assessment as learning*, where students perform an activity in which they are engaged as critical assessors of the teaching and learning process and are expected to make sense of information whilst relating it to prior knowledge, and then master the skills involved (Abejehu, 2016; Asabe, 2007; Juliet, 2007). Continuous assessment is applied in order to improve the quality of education. This is also in line with the opinion of Abejehu (2016), who also contended that continuous assessment is a major component of the teaching and learning process, and acts as a key practice in terms of educational quality assurance.

### *Student evaluation of teaching*

The current study revealed that the student teachers and their learning was at the center of implementing QA practices in the PTTCs. The students were reportedly deeply engaged in ensuring and enhancing the quality of the education they sought to achieve whilst enrolled at their respective teacher training colleges. All of the respondents from the four colleges mentioned being involved in QA, and mostly through providing feedback by completing surveys regarding their satisfaction with their courses, and in evaluating the teaching and learning process.

When students are involved in the implementation of QA practices, it helps them to take ownership of their own studies, and thereby to improve its quality. This is supported by Coates (2007), who asserted that involving students in QA enables them to become acquainted with what is taking place in their college, and hence to contribute to their own productive learning and quality of education. In addition, Trowler (2010) contended that student engagement in quality processes leads to positive outcomes in terms of student success and development, as well as the general quality of education.

### *Self-evaluation*

Respondents from the private PTTCs (GBK004, GBK006, and BLB001) revealed that their colleges conducted self-evaluation in order to identify the strengths and weakness in the implementation of QA practices so as to improve the teaching and learning process. In support of this, Podgornik and Mažgo (2015) elaborated that the aim of self-evaluation is to ensure quality, development, and progress within educational institutions. They further stated that self-evaluation results in the preparation of action plans, which include the introduction of changes, improvements, and innovation to the appropriate areas in need.

### *External Quality Assurance Practices*

The external quality assurance practices are those conducted by external experts or agencies in order to ensure the quality of education delivered by the PTTCs.

### *External examination*

All of the student teachers voiced that their colleges were fully involved in external examinations as a means to improving the quality of education. Student assessment is vital in ensuring the quality of education as it ensures learners have achieved the expected earning outcomes and competency levels. External examinations are conducted by external examiners who remain objective whilst grading students in order to ensure that the quality of student outcomes is achieved without compromise.

### *Accreditation*

Students from the private PTTCs (GBK001, GBK007, and BLB005) revealed that their colleges had been through the accreditation process. Accreditation involves self-evaluation, internal quality audit followed by external review and audit, and finally to the rejection or acceptance of the accreditation application of the higher education institution (Howard, 2006). According to Geda (2015), Maniku (2008), and Sywelem and Witte (2009), accreditation ensures and enhances the quality of education through promoting institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and the quality efficiency of the education process, management, as well as faculty's commitment to student learning.

### *Challenges to Implementation of QA Practices in PTTCs*

While conducting QA practices, several challenges were encountered by the PTTCs. The study revealed these challenges as negative attitude towards QA, lack of skilled manpower for QA implementation, improper Communication, and lack of financial resources for QA.

#### *Negative attitude towards QA*

The study revealed that QA implementation can be negatively affected by negative attitude towards QA. Many tutors look at QA as a tactic to find fault in their work, which may ultimately put their jobs at stake. This is in line the opinion of Odhiambo (2014), who contends that QA implementation can face several obstacles, with the most prevalent being the resistance of staff due to negative attitudes towards QA, whereby they feel QA to be just another form of managerial oversight designed to push them around as they attempt to do their work.

#### *Lack of skilled manpower for QA implementation*

The study revealed one challenge faced in QA implementation is often an inadequacy of well-trained human resources in the area of quality assurance. Often, the management of the PTTCs select tutors who possess limited or no knowledge in the field of QA, and as a result they exhibit indifference to the task, making it difficult to implement QA effectively.

#### *Improper communication*

The study revealed a lack of proper communication of QA practices and policies between the PTTC management teams and the student teachers, leading to misunderstandings about the whole QA process and the subsequent improper implementation of its practices. The respondents further mentioned that their colleges lacked any system of conveying information regarding the progress of QA from the Ministry of Education and Sports to the students, and even to the parents or other stakeholders. Because of this, most stakeholders only see changes taking place without their knowledge or those that they are asked to implement, thereby creating considerable challenges to attaining and maintaining quality of education.

#### *Lack of financial resources for QA*

Another theme that emerged from the focus group discussions was the lack of financial resources available for the implementing of QA practices. It is well known that ensuring quality of education comes with a certain cost, therefore in situations where there is an inadequate allocation of necessary funding, there may be considerable challenges in ensuring quality assurance and enhancing its effectiveness in practice. This finding is also in line with that of Mureithi (2012), Odhiambo (2014), and Pongo et al. (2015), who also confirmed that a lack of financial resources cripples the process of implementing QA practices within education institutions.

## **Conclusion**

From the preceding Findings and Discussion sections, Uganda's PTTCs can be seen to apply several quality assurance practices such as continuous assessment, accreditation, self-evaluation, external examination, and student involvement in QA through the evaluating of teaching they receive. These practices are applied in compliance with the QA framework for tertiary and higher education institutions, as set out by the NCHE. The current study also

revealed certain challenges to the successful implementation of QA practices, which are negative attitude towards QA, lack of skilled manpower for QA implementation, improper communication, and lack of financial resources for QA.

Although the current study was limited to the Primary Teacher Training Colleges in Uganda's educational setting and on an interpretative qualitative paradigm, it is anticipated that the findings of the study will help to provide an understanding as to what QA practices are implemented within PTTCs through this examination of the students teacher's perspective. The findings of the study may thereby assist Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports and other policymakers in developing QA processes and systems better suited to the PTTCs. Additionally, the outcomes of the study may also shed light on some of the philosophical and epistemological issues regarding the implementation of QA practices, and how they can be best applied in order to inform the current practices.

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