

# QUALITY ASSURANCE AUDIT AND CORPORATE GOVERNANCE ISSUES IN HIGHER DEGREES: TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCED OBJECTIVITY

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## Abstract

### How to cite this paper:

Ngwakwe, C. C., & Ngoepe, M. A. (2017). Quality assurance audit and corporate governance issues in higher degrees: Toward a framework for enhanced objectivity. *Corporate Ownership & Control*, 14(4-2), 396-404. <http://doi.org/10.22495/cocv14i4c2art5>

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ISSN Online: 1810-3057

ISSN Print: 1727-9232

Received: 07.04.2017

Accepted: 18.06.2017

JEL Classification: M14, M42, L15

DOI: 10.22495/cocv14i4c2art5

Quality assurance in service organisations such as the universities is a vital component of the audit process. Therefore, this paper evaluates the quality assurance audit and corporate governance issues in higher degrees. The paper became necessary given rising concern over apparent external assurers' subjectivity and domination of the higher degree assurance process. The paper inclined on three main objectives, namely to determine how external assurers' objectivity relate with assurance outcome on higher degrees, to know how the clarity of institutional assurance rubric relate with external assurance outcome and to determine how supervisors' neutrality relate with external audit assurance outcome on higher degrees. The paper adopted a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative approaches, which firstly reviewed the literature on the impugned issues in higher degree quality assurance and thereafter proceeded to use Chi-square statistics to conduct a quantitative analysis of questionnaire responses on higher degree assurance process. Findings suggest that existing quality assurance of higher degrees is asymmetrically inclined more on the external assurer, which thus dominate internal corporate governance process of quality assurance, leaving only a mere ratifying role to the institutional corporate governance process. The Chi-Square statistical finding on all the three objectives showed a P value less than the alpha of 0.05 ( $P < 0.05$ ), which indicates the following: external assurers' objectivity relates with the assurance outcome; the clarity of institutional assurance rubric relates with the assurance outcome; similarly, anonymity of the supervisor does relate with the assurance outcome. The paper contributes to the literature by suggesting a framework to improve higher degree quality assurance-audit, which includes supervisor and institutional neutrality, a balance between external assurers' decisions and internal governance control decisions.

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance, Postgraduate Degrees, External Assurance, Objectivity, Peer Review, Standards, Integrity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a soaring call from scholars around the world for a transformation of advanced postgraduate degrees' assessment and/or assessment process to instil objectivity, transparency and consistency (Prieto, Holbrook and Bourke, 2016). Despite the importance of advanced postgraduate degree assessment on postgraduate degrees' quality and effect on candidates, related

research on postgraduate degrees assessment is still developing (Johnston 1997; Bourke and Holbrook 2013), especially within the South African context. Research dealing on postgraduate degree assessment is not common, more so around the nuance of this paper - variables associated with postgraduate degree assessors' decisions. While there are variations of slants in each of the existing incipient research on postgraduate degree assessment, this paper takes a subtlety viewpoint by

focusing on the factors associated with the fairness and unfairness of assessors whilst engaging in postgraduate degrees assessment (Carter 2008). Apart from the current advent of research on postgraduate degree assessment, it seems that this important niche in education quality assurance has been taken as a given which has resulted in a situation where postgraduate degree assessment have been covered in apparent mystery. Under this circumstance, the assessors' opinion and/or judgement about a thesis/dissertation, has largely, been venerated and accepted as inviolable by institutions of higher learning (Carter 2008). Despite concomitant snobbery and damage done to concerned individuals (James 1903), questioning the decision of assessors by institutions or candidates is not a common occurrence (Poole 2015) even when some assessors' decisions trigger contrasting opinions (Poole 2015).

The result of this apparently dominant role of the postgraduate degree assessor seem not to have been healthy for the helpless postgraduate degree candidates and sporadically for the higher institutions of learning; the damage meted to candidates and invariably to the institutions is well expounded in the seminal essay "the PhD Octopus" (James, 1903). Despite this though, the acceptance of the status quo system of doctoral assessment as a given and hence sacrosanct, has attracted little entreaty by candidates and institutions of higher learning even when certain assessors' decisions appear subjective (Carter 2008; Peters and Ceci 1982).

*"Doctoral supervisors and examiners are experienced academics but they rarely turn their critical gaze on to doctoral assessment itself"* (Poole, 2015, 92), Poole, reports questionnaire interview response where an experienced academic indicates that the status quo has no problem hence there is no need to fix any problem (Poole 2015, 92). This is not surprising as the work life of modern academics is stress laden (Muurlink and Poyatos 2010). therefore academics find little time to interrogate the status quo.

Be that as it may, the issues of basic quality assurance assessment principles such as reliability, validity, transparency, fairness, credibility, academic integrity including static procedures of postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment require action. Lack of research on postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment and doubtful and variant views from academics regarding the purpose and method of conducting postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment makes it pertinent to conduct research in this area and to galvanise inquisitions about the authenticity of higher degree examinations (Poole 2015)

This paper attempts to initiate a bridge to the seemingly dearth in related research by peering into the impugned issues about external examination and most importantly to evaluate the factors that are associated with the decision of postgraduate degree assessors.

Accordingly, the three key questions that the paper hinges on are whether the clarity of institutional rubrics, independence of the supervisor and the objectivity stance of the assessor affect examiners' decisions. Accordingly, the objective of this paper is to evaluate how the postgraduate

degree assessors' decisions are affected by the clarity of institutional rubrics, the independence of supervisors, academic integrity and the objectivity stance of the assessor.

This paper is structured as follows; the ensuing section after the introduction situates the quality assurance of higher degree within the audit and corporate governance function. The next section reviews the literature on contested issues about postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment. The subsequent section after the literature presents the method and results, the final section presents the conclusion and agenda for further research.

### 1.1. Quality Assurance of Thesis, Rooted in Audit & Corporate Governance Function

According to the American Society for Quality [ASQ] (2017) quality assurance is a core component of the audit function; this is because quality assurance is used to compare attained quality against the set standard for quality in order to determine deviations and to control such deviations. Hence, the audit function cannot proceed without quality assurance as a prelude to audit decision. The same is applicable to quality assurance of higher degree (a final product, in this case service) of universities - which are service organisations. Quality assurance of higher degrees precedes the final audit by the supreme auditor of higher educational outputs, which is the department of higher education.

Quality control and quality assurance are twin functions, which are tentacles inherent in corporate audit (AQU, 2017). Whilst quality control is typical of a product company, quality assurance relates to a service company (ASQ, 2017) such as the universities.

Similar to a product organisation, the university higher degree assurance processes pass through different internal stages of corporate governance control. A higher degree such as the doctoral degree, begins with the initiation of a proposal, which passes through quality assurance assessment at the departmental level, the school level and the faculty levels. On completion of the thesis, an external assessor then subjects it to external quality assurance. The quality assurance assessment by the external assessor is thereafter put through the highest academic governance body of the university, which is the senate. The senate as the governing body of the university ratifies the external assurance report and approves conferment of degree if recommended by the external assessor (external assessor). However, a seeming asymmetry, which researchers seem to worry about, is that the current system of quality assurance of higher degrees bestows greater decision (seemingly final decision) on the external assessor. This apparently vitiates the utmost need for a balanced assurance between internal corporate governance assurance processes and external assurance.

For quality assurance, strategy to assume an appreciable level of effectiveness within the corporate governance setting, all levels of assurance must be balanced (Measure-Evaluation, 2016). According to AQU (2017) internal evaluation should form the crux of quality assurance; from the respondents' comments, doctoral thesis progress through different phases of internal quality

assurance and governance processes within the university. However, respondents seem to agree that the external assurer seem to have final say or decision on the quality of the product (thesis). The authors argue that, in this instance, the balanced approach in quality assurance is vitiated, making the assurance of thesis somewhat asymmetry. Given that the external assurer's decision seem to assume the primacy position; it somewhat demeans internal governance oversight and control. If not redressed, the external assessors (external assessors) might continue to impose personal decisions which on occasions are fraught with unfairness.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the South African context, little research exists, which interrogates higher degree examination. On a global setting, research on postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment has dwelt more on the analysis of assessors' report (Mullins and Kiley 2002). This paucity thus informs the inconsistent nature and the concomitant subjectivity that lay intrinsic in postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment (Tinkler and Jackson 2000). Doctoral and master's degree quality assurance assessment is therefore seen to be obscured in apparent mystery and couched in secrecy (Burnham, 1994; Quality Assurance Agency 1999; Tinkler and Jackson 2000). This unpalatable air seems like a bulwark that bridges the candidate and the assessors such that the assessor appears like a 'colossus' not to be dared but revered even under an apparently flawed and/or subjective judgement. There have thus been anecdotes that traumatise postgraduate students about their fate as they complete their thesis/dissertation (Mullins and Kiley 2002). Striving toward the independence of external assessor is seen as a partial measure to boost objectivity and academic integrity; however, Tinkler and Jackson (2000) decries that some higher institutions of learning retain external assessors for longer periods leading to undue familiarity between the assessor and academic departments, resulting to apparent erosion of independence that brews subjectivity in postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment. Furthermore, Tinkler and Jackson (2000) findings indicate that some higher institutions of learning have cluttered quality assurance assessment rubrics and/or policies which often relinquish aspects of postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment integrity at the mercy of assessors. Where quality assurance assessment rubrics lack clear guideline, the assessor becomes in charge and applies his/her whim.

In their research on institutional policy, Tinkler and Jackson (2000) evaluated the influence of institutional policy on doctoral quality assurance assessment in the UK. The authors studied institutional policy from 20 British universities and isolated the strategy and standards that support rules administering quality assurance assessment of postgraduate degrees. They looked at meanings of what constitutes a doctorate degree and arrangements overseeing a scope of practices that are vital to the quality assurance assessment procedure. The exploration uncovers that in spite of the fact that there is a substantial level of institutional consistency in regards to key criteria

for the conferment of a doctoral qualification, close review of institutional policies show that the doctoral quality assurance assessment is conceptualised and operationalised in several ways. This finding depicts divergent approaches, which defies uniformity in doctoral quality assurance assessment process.

In their comparative research on engineering doctorate quality assurance assessment, Prieto, Holbrook and Bourke (2016) discovered that quality assurance assessment rubrics such as original contribution of the thesis, publishability of the thesis, depth and recency of the literature used and language (or communication) differ significantly from the rubrics in other disciplines. According to Prieto et al (2016) who quoted Moodie and Hapgood (2012) and Borrell-Damian et al. (2010), quality assurance assessment of engineering doctorate may take different forms according to the university policy, which range from submission of portfolio of individual publications or the production of a single research thesis. This type of cluttered arrangement may therefore incubate subjectivity in thesis examination due to lack of uniformity in quality assurance assessment criteria. In other instances from current research, despite the existence of clear institutional rubrics for postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment, some assessors recline on idiosyncratic quality assurance assessment, which is devoid of objectivity (Agu, Omenyi and Odimegwu 2015). The quality of quality assurance assessment rubrics (Christie *et al* 2015) is also very important in motivating assessors to apply the rubrics. The use of explicit rubrics is very fundamental in fostering objectivity, academic integrity and transparency in postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment and assessors ought to adhere to the rubrics where such exists. Furthermore, it will be helpful if supervisors could introduce the institutional rubrics of quality assurance assessment to postgraduate degree candidates during the process of their research (Agu *et al* 2015; Prins *et al* 2015) as this will pummel them to write their thesis or dissertation whilst focussing on the quality expectations of the institution. Even in the existence of a rubric, assessors disagree on what really constitutes a good rubric. In their study of inconsistencies in doctoral quality assurance assessment decisions, Denicolo (2003) found low level of agreement on what could constitute a good rubric for doctoral quality assurance assessment; this study accentuates the inherently embedded subjectivity in postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment.

Aside from the fundamental importance of rubrics, prior experience of assessors is another vital ingredient that may mar objective quality assurance assessment. Research on postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment finds that assessors' experience has significant influence on thesis quality assurance assessment and decision (Lovat *et al* 2015). Whilst experienced assessors are found to be more understanding and less tough with their quality assurance assessments, inexperienced assessors are found to be tough and less objective (Lawson, Marsh & Tansley, 2003). Unbridled euphoria of a newly acquired doctorate is an element to consider in choosing postgraduate degree assessors.

In their evaluation of doctorate quality assurance assessment in UK, Poole (2015) demonstrated that respondents hold differentiating views about the reason, esteem and level of reliability and quality assurance assessment of doctoral quality assurance assessment. In another related research, Johnston (1997) applied a qualitative analysis to examine 51 assessors' reports of different doctorate theses to search for common themes in these reports. Findings from Johnston's analysis show differences in the format of reports and recommendations on the theses. Johnston highlighted the need for postgraduate degree assessors to approach thesis quality assurance assessment with a degree of objectivity and academic integrity, similar to when one is confronted with a new reading of other materials.

**Table 1.** Impugned contents from previous research

<i>Quoted Content</i>	<i>Impugned Issue</i>
<i>the exercise of examiner judgement entails the possibility of inconsistency (Poole, 2015, p. 95)</i>	subjectivity
<i>being an examiner for a doctoral ... involves the exercise of (sometimes fallible) judgement, but they see this as unavoidable (Poole, 2015, p. 95)</i>	subjectivity
<i>The PhD examination process are shrouded in mystery (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000, p.168)</i>	confidentiality barrier
<i>PhD examination process, a process that is arguably far less transparent than those at other levels of British higher education (Tinkler and Jackson, 2000, p.167)</i>	transparency
<i>Academics accept that being an examiner for a doctoral degree involves the exercise of (sometimes fallible) judgement, but they see this as unavoidable (Poole, 2015, p. 95). (with emphasis)</i>	subjectivity
<i>Doctorate examiner judgements (even when guided by university documentation and made in good faith) may at times be unreliable (Poole, 2015, p. 95).</i>	subjectivity
<i>There are far too many examiners who take on the role to justify their own academic work and fail to be as objective as they should in the exam (Poole, 2015, p. 94)</i>	subjectivity

Whilst describing the nature of doctoral quality assurance assessment and how subjectivity is embedded, James (1903) puts down his feelings in the following excerpt of his essay titled the PhD Octopus:

*To interfere with the free development of talent, to obstruct the natural play of supply and demand in the teaching profession, to foster academic snobbery by the prestige of certain privileged institutions, to transfer accredited value from essential manhood to an outward badge, to blight hopes and promote invidious sentiments, to divert the attention of aspiring youth from direct dealings with truth to the passing of examinations, - such consequences, if they exist, ought surely to be regarded as drawbacks to the system, and an enlightened public consciousness ought to be keenly alive to the importance of reducing their amount. Candidates themselves do seem to be keenly conscious of some of these evils, but outside of*

*their ranks or in the general public no such consciousness, so far as I can see, exists; or if it does exist, it fails to express itself aloud. Schools, Colleges, and Universities, appear enthusiastic over the entire system, just as it stands, and unanimously applaud all its developments. (James, 1903, 2)*

In an empirical case study, Poole (2015) identifies issues of concern relating to subjectivity in doctoral quality assurance assessment process. According to Poole (2015), some assessors' attitude and behaviour may undermine the expected fairness in a doctoral quality assurance assessment; in some instances, pomposity, aggressiveness and arrogance are evident in the manner with which some doctoral assessors conduct themselves in their quality assurance assessment. There are empirical instances where the doctoral assessor arrogates full ownership of the process, thinks and behaves egocentrically, forgetting that the student is at the centre stage of the process but acts to parade their own agenda of elevating their preferred research paradigm (Poole 2015). It is not surprising therefore that some apparently heavy handedness by some doctoral assessors have been described, with detest, as if it is a "rite to passage thing" (Poole, 2015 96; Sinclair 2007 111; Tinkler and Jackson 2002). Experts agree that fairness is a necessary ingredient to instil transparency (Boulware, Troll, Wang 2007), hence the theory of fairness is closely allied to the discussion of postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment.

## 2.1. The Theory of Fairness

In Folger and Cropanzano (2001) fairness theory, blame is elevated as the fulcrum of fairness and justice. Therefore, fairness in social justice is described as a situation where an action has been performed in a manner that no one might be blamed for the outcome of the action. However, unfairness may arise if an action has been performed in a manner that "threatens another person's material or psychological wellbeing" (Folger and Cropanzano, 2001, 3) and someone may be blamed for such action. Here lies the intersection between fairness theory and newsman's notion of objectivity. The newsman conducts reports in a certain objective way to create a bulwark to ward off blame - based on clear criterion and transparency - evidence based reporting and conclusions devoid of personal proclivities. It is argued that a perception or insinuation of unfairness in an event outcomes has an enormous propensity to trigger a change in behaviours and attitudes of concerned individuals or institutions (Nicklin., Greenbaum, McNall, Folger and Williams, 2011). In this regard, it could be reasonable to imagine that the outcome of postgraduate degree assessor's decision might have a negative or positive effect on candidates or institutions (but mostly on candidates assumedly), should the outcome be unfair.

"Fairness perceptions are influenced by contextual variables (i.e., outcome severity, knowledge and expertise, sin of commission vs. omission) and counterfactual thinking" (Nicklin, Greenbaum, McNall, Folger and Williams, 2011, 127). Research has proved that counterfactual thoughts

may trigger unfairness or fairness perception. For example, Gilland et al (2001), quoted in Nicklin, Greenbaum, McNall, Folger and Williams, 2011, 127) applied counterfactual reducing experiments and discovered that counterfactual reduction could reduce perception of unfairness. This might also imply that for an actor such as an examiner, a counterfactual reducing attitude might also reduce examiners propensity to be unfair by examining the thesis not from the examiner's preferences but by looking at what indeed the researcher set out to achieve through the preferred method of the researcher. This way, the often-reported intransigent poster of assessors might be moderated to give room for fairness and/or objectivity in quality assurance assessment.

Roese (1999) evaluated the functional implications of counterfactual thinking on decision making and deciphered types of bias - liberal bias and conservative bias. Accordingly, Roese (1999) found that counterfactual thoughts could trigger liberal bias on decision makers, which they describe as "capricious" (fickle, unreliable, inconsistent) - this is indeed analogous to the preceding research literature review that bemoans apparent unreliability and/or inconsistency in higher degree examination. Correspondingly, they find that counterfactual thinking might as well trigger conservative bias described as "rigid" (inflexible, intransigent, obstinate). This bias is also analogous to the preceding literature indications about the status of postgraduate degree assessors' objectivity; this is why Roese (1999) posit that counterfactual thought may blind the decision maker's soundness of mind (see also Robbennolt and Sobus 1997).

The thematic inclination of the literature thus far hinges on assessors' objectivity, transparency and institutional rubrics and/or policy. However, little literature, if any, has examined the potential effect of supervisors' influence on assessors' decisions. This paper hopes to add to existing

literature by re-examining the effect of assessors' objectivity and institutional rubrics on assessors' decision outcome within the South Africa setting. In addition to the aforementioned two major variables considered in existing literature, the authors also consider the influence of supervisor's neutrality on the examiner's decision outcome on thesis/dissertation. The authors hope that consideration of supervisor's neutrality would add further insight toward strengthening existing quality assurance on higher degree examinations. The following section presents the methodology and results.

### 3. METHOD AND RESULTS

This research combined a questionnaire survey (Poole 2005) with a "critical interpretive synthesis of the literature" (Dixon-Woods et al 2006, 1). Questionnaire structure was designed to fit the responses into a two-by-two contingency table in chi-square statistics for test of association. The Chi-Square statistics was considered suitable since the variables are categorical in nature (Agresti and Kateri 2011). The Chi-Square analysis was conducted with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Previous research about postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment and/or education research such as (Ortelli 2016) applied the Chi-Square statistics. Out of 40 questionnaires sent out, 24 were returned; respondents were asked to tick whether aspects of objectivity, institutional rubric and supervisors neutrality does affect their quality assurance assessment decision of thesis or dissertation. The Chi-Square analysis was conducted at an alpha of 0.05, therefore an association is interpreted to exist if the significance level from the test is less than 0.05, which is  $P < 0.05$ . The following section presents the results for each research question.

**Table 1.** Chi-square result on how examiners' objectivity relate with the quality assurance assessment outcome

Case Processing Summary						
	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
ExtObjectivity * AssOutcome1	24	100.0%	0	0.0%	24	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.000a	1	.000		
Continuity Correctionb	18.963	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	26.992	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
N of Valid Cases	24				

Symmetric Measures			
		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-1.000	.000
	Cramer's V	1.000	.000
N of Valid Cases		24	

**Table 2.** Chi-square result on how institutional assurance rubric relate with quality assurance assessment outcome

<b>Case Processing Summary</b>						
	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
InstPolicy * AssOutcome2	24	100.0%	0	0.0%	24	100.0%

<b>Chi-Square Tests</b>					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.000 <sup>a</sup>	1	.000		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	19.711	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	30.553	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
N of Valid Cases	24				

<b>Symmetric Measures</b>			
		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-1.000	.000
	Cramer's V	1.000	.000
N of Valid Cases		24	

**Table 3.** Chi-square result on how supervisor's neutrality relate with quality assurance assessment outcome

<b>Case Processing Summary</b>						
	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
SuperNeutrality * AssOutcome3	24	100.0%	0	0.0%	24	100.0%

<b>Chi-Square Tests</b>					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.000 <sup>a</sup>	1	.000		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	19.404	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	28.975	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
N of Valid Cases	24				

<b>Symmetric Measures</b>			
		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-1.000	.000
	Cramer's V	1.000	.000
N of Valid Cases		24	

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The first objective of this paper is to ascertain whether external assessor's objectivity does affect the quality assurance assessment outcome. Accordingly, the first Chi-Square analysis (Table 1) sought to evaluate if external assessor's objectivity does affect quality assurance assessment outcome or decision. Results from the above analysis show that both the Phi and Cramer's test of associated gave a significance level of  $P < 0.001$  which is less than the alpha level of 0.05. This therefore shows that within the sample of study, external assessor's objectivity does influence the assessors' decision. The result show that lack of objectivity would result in an unfair quality assurance assessment decision. Unfairness could be positive or negative; an assessor could be positively biased where the assessor is sympathetic with the research topic or the student. Being sympathetic with the student could result from previous acquaintance with the student, acquaintance with the department and/or

institution where the student is enrolled, or a form of reciprocity.

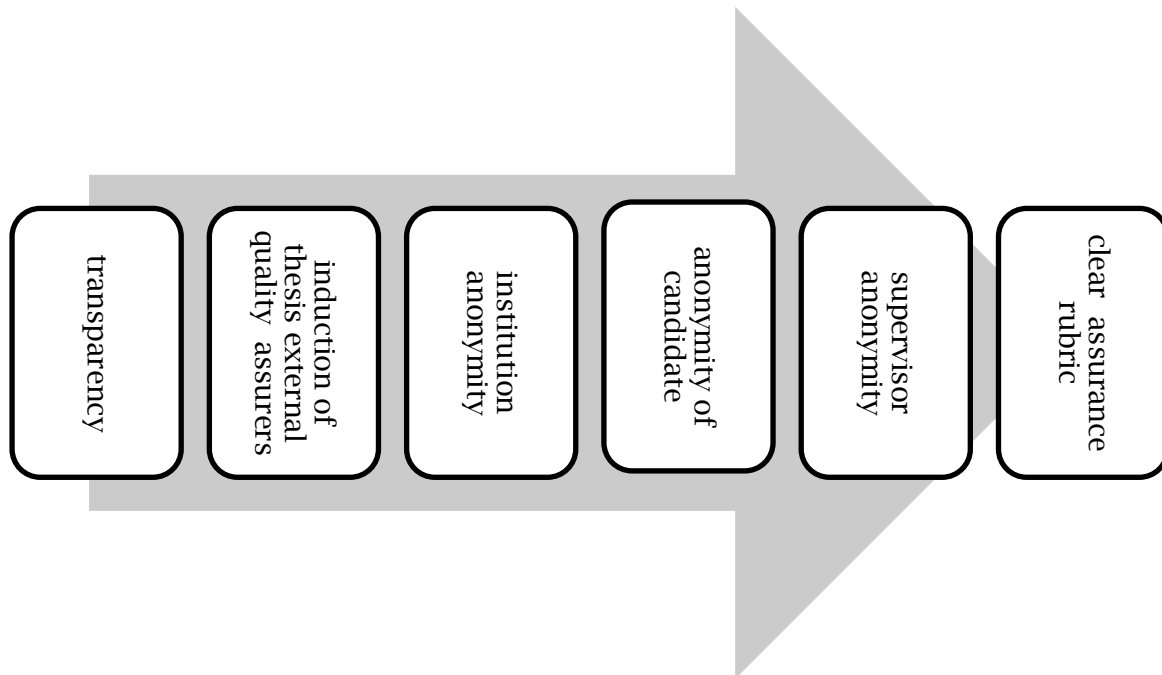
The second objective of this paper is to evaluate whether the extent of clarity of institutional quality assurance assessment rubric or policy does influence the quality assurance assessment outcome. Therefore, the second Chi-Square analysis (Table 2) sought to evaluate if there is an association between institutional quality assurance assessment rubric and assessors' outcome or decision. Results from the above analysis show that both the Phi and Cramer's test of associated gave a significance level of  $P < 0.001$  which is less than the alpha level of 0.05. This therefore shows that within the sample of study, clarity of institutional rubric does influence the assessors' decision. This finding resonates with the previous research that highlights the importance of quality assurance assessment criteria on quality assurance assessment outcome on higher degrees (Denicolo, 2003; Tinkler and Jackson, 2000).

The third objective of this paper is to evaluate whether the thesis/dissertation supervisor's

neutrality during the quality assurance assessment process does affect the quality assurance assessment outcome of the assessor. Consequently, the third Chi-Square analysis (Table 3) sought to evaluate if there is an association between the thesis supervisors' neutrality and assessor's decision outcome. From the Chi-square analysis of question three, results show a significance level of  $P < 0.00$ , which indicates a significant association between supervisors' neutrality and quality assurance assessment outcome of higher degree examiners.

*Toward a Framework for Enhancing Objectivity in Thesis/Dissertation Quality Assurance.* Extant research reviewed in the preceding sections show that many factors becloud the objectivity of thesis and dissertation assessors. Therefore, the authors contribute modestly to the literature by proposing the following framework to improve the objectivity in higher degree quality assurance audit. The proposal is by no means sacrosanct, rather it is meant to galvanise further research debate and practical application to test the proposal functionality and efficacy.

**Figure 1.** Suggested framework toward enhanced objectivity in thesis/dissertation quality assurance audit



In Figure 1, enhanced transparency could be instilled in postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment process in many ways including *inter alia*, making master's and doctoral students aware of the rubric used in their thesis/dissertation quality assurance assessment, this would motivate students to conduct their research toward fulfilling the quality assurance assessment criteria and expectations contained in the institutional rubrics. This would also enable the master's or doctoral candidates to embark on self-evaluation along the trajectory of their research. Furthermore, since research indicates that examiners without experience tend to be tough in their quality assurance assessment and concomitant decisions (Mullins & Kiley 2002; Lawson, Marsh & Tansley 2003; Kiley 2009), it becomes important not to leave the faith of the doctoral and master candidates in the hands of inexperienced examiners. The overseer of higher institutions of learning such as the Department of Higher Education and Training and other relevant statutory bodies may initiate a process of formal induction of fresh doctorate holders who will add to the pool of experienced thesis/dissertation assessors. A competency certificate of induction into postgraduate degree thesis and dissertation quality assurance assessment could be awarded on completion of an

induction course to such potential assessors after having gone through an intensive short learning programme training on thesis/dissertation quality assurance assessment under the tutelage of experienced assessors. Prior research reviewed in the foregoing sections indicates apparent bias against race and institution where the candidate is coming from (Peters & Ceci 1982; Lynn and Parker 2006). Consequently, the authors propose three genre of anonymity in thesis/dissertation quality assurance assessment process. Whilst the status quo keeps the assessor secret to the student and in some cases to the supervisor, but discloses the student, the institution and the supervisor to the assessor, the authors suggest an all-round anonymity (or blind quality assurance assessment) in the process of thesis/dissertation quality assurance assessment. One way of achieving this is that the Department of Higher Education and Training and other relevant statutory bodies could create a postgraduate degrees quality assurance assessment agency whose responsibility will be to ensure anonymity in thesis/dissertation quality assurance assessment. Such agency would assume the responsibility establishing a database of qualified and experienced assessors. It will also receive and send thesis/dissertations to and from the universities and thesis assessors. Before the

theses/dissertations are sent to assessors, the agency would ensure that the name of the institution, name of candidate and name of the supervisor are expunged from the thesis. Peters and Ceci (1982) research provides a substantive evidence that a thesis or dissertation without an identification of candidate's name, candidate's institution and supervisor would be less vulnerable to negative bias by assessors. Peters and Ceci (1982) offers a convincing proof that candidate names and institution where the candidate is enrolled may constitute negative bias by assessors or reviewers. In their research on the fate of published articles, Peters and Ceci, (1982) experimented with 9 published articles which were written by notable scholars from prestigious institutions, Peters and Ceci tactfully removed the names of the notable authors and their prestigious institutions. Unknown fictitious names and less prestigious institutions were used to replace the original names. Out of the nine papers, which were already published, only one was accepted for publication whilst the others were rejected, thus Peters and Ceci argue that authors' names and their institutions (prestigious or less prestigious) constitute a source of bias in peer review. Therefore, relying on this practical evidence, the authors of this paper make a proposal for a transformation of thesis and dissertation quality assurance assessment toward anonymity of candidate, the institution and supervisors of thesis/dissertation. The authors hope that this proposal should constitute an agenda for further research - to experiment on the anonymity of thesis/dissertation to see what difference it makes on examiners decision. The final item in the above framework is the need for a clearly constructed institutional quality assurance assessment rubric. Such a rubric would change the position of some assessors who assume an intransigent posture toward a thesis; it might make assessors to assume the newsman's (reporters) notion of objectivity by quoting the rubric as a guide to thesis and dissertation report and/or decision. A clearly constructed rubric might foster some elements of similarity and objectivity in assessors' reports.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to assess some impugned issues that becloud objectivity in higher degrees quality assurance process. The paper applied a mixed approach and found that contentions amongst scholars include *inter alia* intransigent posture of thesis/dissertation external assurance assessors. Others include inflexible and cluttered institutional thesis/dissertation assurance rubrics, and prejudice and/or nepotism. These contentions demean the veracity and comparability of the quality of postgraduate degrees across universities and related institutes. The paper applied the Chi-square statistics to evaluate possible association between three main variables - examiners' objectivity, supervisors' neutrality and clarity of institutional rubric on quality assurance assessment outcome. Findings from the Chi-Square analysis show a significant association between the three variables and quality assurance assessment outcome. Drawing from the literature findings and the result of this paper, the authors proposes a framework to foster

objectivity in postgraduate degree quality assurance assessment to enhance comparability and academic integrity. Accordingly, the paper suggests that thesis/dissertation assessors should adopt the newsman's notion of objectivity which is founded on quoted procedures to enhance objectivity and to moderate bias, such objectivity can be enhanced under the guidance of a clearly constructed thesis/dissertation assurance rubrics and anonymity of candidates, supervisors and institutions where the candidate and the thesis comes from. If the instructional assurance rubrics for thesis/dissertation quality assurance assessment are clearly constructed, the assessors would quote the rubric as their basis of quality assurance assessment and this would contribute to foster uniformity of quality assurance assessment report and decisions between different assessors of theses and dissertations. The paper also highlighted the need to balance assurance decision between external assessors and internal corporate governance control decision to reduce excessive quality assurance decision from external quality assessors. The authors hope that this paper contributes to the literature since the proposed framework offers an agenda for further research. For instance, a new research might experiment on the anonymity of thesis/dissertation to see what difference it makes on assessors' decisions against the status quo where students' names, supervisors and institutions are disclosed to the assessor.

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