An Examination of Quality Assurance Compliance in Selected Universities of Lusaka District, Zambia

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Abstract: *This paper examined quality assurance compliance in selected private universities of Lusaka district, Zambia. The objectives of the study were to explore and examine adherence to quality assurance policies that inform practices, establish the factors affecting quality assurance policies, and establish measures to ensure institutions comply with quality assurance policies. The study utilized a descriptive survey design and a mixed-methods approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from participants. One hundred and forty four (144) participants were selected using purposive and simple random sampling. Using structured questionnaires and interview guides, primary data was collected from two private universities in Lusaka District through questionnaire distribution and conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The study revealed the existence of 8 critical policies, namely admission, library, research, laboratory, examination, delivery and assessment, and master and strategic plan. The study further revealed that implementation of these policies is affected by lack of resources such as monetary, infrastructure, and human resources, and governance problems such as communication barriers and lack or unavailability of quality assurance policies. The study recommends that the Higher Education Authority and other quality assurance bodies should intensify their monitoring visits to ensure compliance with academic quality assurance. In addition, the bodies should make unannounced random visits to HEIs. Further, universities should put in place mechanisms that will enforce universities to have a compliance obligation to the set guidelines and circulars and place internal controls to monitor various faculties, lecturers, and students.*

Keywords: *Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Compliance, Private University, Standards*

1. INTRODUCTION

The provision of formal and non-formal education and training in Zambia is the responsibility of multiple of agencies, including private-owned universities and schools. However, the rapid rate of population has outstripped the economy's capacity to expand facilities and programs, coupled with the demand for higher education, leading to the decentralization of tertiary education to private universities (Dangara, 2016; Mvula, 2023).

It is important to note that the provision of higher education in the country is diverse, and with further development it will become even more so. It is provided in autonomous, semi-autonomous, and government institutions. Its programs differ in scope, depth and duration. These considerations mean that, in the absence of an integrated national policy for higher education, provision at this level tends to be fragmented and uncoordinated.

On the other hand, quality of teaching and learning has become a major strategic issue in higher education systems across the globe over the past decades (UNESCO 2018). In the last two to three decades, Higher Education systems worldwide have introduced quality assurance systems, which are instruments to make universities' achievements in higher education visible and comparable. The quality assurance frameworks set are meant to help the nation have common standards and guidelines, which, in turn, create mutual trust for stakeholders (for example, regional labour markets and employers) in the quality of the programmes provided and degrees awarded by the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in countries. While the concept of quality assurance is not new, however, the range of terminology and methodologies now used to define, develop, and apply it are growing. There are many different perceptions of what is meant by quality in higher education.

According to UNESCO (2018), the Government of Zambia has also responded to the increasing demand by introducing legislation as mentioned earlier to involve the private sector in the provision of higher education, leading to the proliferation of private higher education Institutions (HEIs). The quality of higher education and its improvement have been issues of high priority on the political and educational agendas of the government and higher education institutions in Zambia. With its desire to provide credible academic and professional qualifications, Zambia, like other developing nations, has adopted various methodologies to address the question of quality in higher education. To effectively manage the mushrooming of higher education institutions, the government established a national quality assurance agency, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), with the Higher Education Act of 2013 (Higher Education Authority, 2020a).

UNESCO (2018) states that since its operationalization, HEA has progressively accredited higher education institutions, which represents an essential step to build a higher education system that delivers quality programmes. Apart from the six public universities recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education, HEA has registered approximately sixty private higher education institutions so far, and the Authority is mandated to accredit academic programmes in both public and private HEIs. Despite the increasing number of universities and corresponding increased student enrolments, quality assurance is among the most complicated problems higher education is still facing (Ministry of Higher Education, 2019). Quality assurances touch on almost every aspect of the system of HEIs Therefore, this study attempts to examine quality assurance compliance in universities of Lusaka district in Zambia.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a descriptive survey design and a mixed-methods approach to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from participants. One hundred and forty four (144) participants were selected using purposive and simple random sampling. Using structured questionnaires and interview guides, primary data was collected from two private universities in Lusaka District through questionnaire distribution and conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The collected data was analyzed in two forms: qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis, while quantitative data utilized the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Demographic characteristics

The study showed a slight domination by female participants (51.4%) against males (48.6%), while the age range revealed the majority (47.2%) being aged between 16 and 25 years. Under occupation, the majority participants (81.3%) were students, as indicated in the table below.

Table 1. *Participants Demographic Analysis*

Variables		Frequency(n=144)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	70	(48.6%)
	Female	74	(51.4%)
Age	16-25 years	68	(47.2%)
	26-35 years	55	(38.2%)
	36 & above	21	(14.6%)
Occupation	Student	117	(81.3%)
	Lecturer	20	(13.9%)
	Head of Department	4	(2.8%)

3.2. Exploring and Examining Compliance to Quality Assurance Policies in Private Universities

The study revealed the existence of 8 critical policies informing practices within the two private universities. The policies in existence were admission policy, examination policy, library policy, research policy, laboratory policy, delivery and assessment policy, master plan, and strategic plan. Furthermore, Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for quality assurance compliance, which reveals an overall mean score of 2.89 (SD = 0.51). This indicates that the 8 policies for quality assurance identified during the investigation are quite effective, with the library policy recording the highest mean value (3.60; SD = 0.737), signifying a slightly higher level of compliance with library standards with laboratory policy recording the lowest mean value (2.24) .

Table 2. *Quality Assurance Policies Mean Scores*

QA Policies	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Deviation
Admission policy	140	1	5	2.43	1.293
Delivery & assessment policy	141	1	5	2.48	1.169
Examination policy	141	1	5	3.09	1.357
Research policy	142	1	5	3.01	1.098
Laboratory policy	141	1	4	2.24	.827
Library policy	140	1	5	3.60	.737
Master plan and strategic plan	20	2	4	3.40	.598
QA Overall Mean	142	1.67	4.00	2.89	.50757

It is clear from the findings that both universities have quality assurance policies guiding the management to standards as stipulated in the HEA Act. These policies foster practices that provide student admission procedures, staff recruitment and development procedures, examination procedures, student's evaluation of courses and teaching effectiveness, and institutional self-assessment (Okae-Adjei, 2016). While this is the case, findings on compliance indicated low level adherence, especially on critical policies such as admission, laboratory, delivery, and assessment. This evidently shows that while policies exist on paper, the universities are not fully complying with quality assurance policies they have in place. This non-compliance may be necessitated by a weak internal monitoring system responsible for tracking quality assurance compliance. In addition, lack of awareness of the existence of the policies among staff members and students may also lead to non-compliance. Dill, Smith & Howe (2017) emphasize the need to publicly avail policies and procedures to allow scrutiny by various stakeholders.

4. FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICIES IN SELECTED PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES OF LUSAKA

Four critical themes informed factors affecting quality assurance policies as identified by key informants namely governance problems, inadequate resources, unqualified staffing, and technological challenges.

4.1. Governance Problems

In establishing factors that affect quality assurance, governance problems were highlighted by those interviewed. Two issues emerged under this theme, one of which is poor communication. Participants lamented on poor communication of available policies to both students and members of staff. One of the participants noted:

'*They don't include everyone when drafting, approving and implementing policies; hence most institutional members are not aware of these policies, leading to confusion and poor implementation in the institution*' [HEI-09]

Another participant, HEI-03, added

'*Certain policies pertaining to students' welfare are decided upon without students' engagement. The gap in information flow is a proven challenge to the university and student population.*'

The second factor identified is a lack of quality assurance policy reviews. Participants noted that most, if not all, policies available are not reviewed regularly to incorporate new trends that improve educational delivery. Participant HEI-02 mentioned that,

'*Aside from poor communication of quality assurance issues to member of staff, there is lack of regular reviews of the policies on quality assurance.*'

4.2. Inadequate Resources

Two issues, namely staff shortage and lack of equipment, were critically emphasized by participants during the interviews. On staff shortage, it was revealed that the universities were not meeting the stipulated lecturer-student ratio as required by Higher Education Authority. A participant said,

'*The ratio of undergraduate research students to the supervisors is too high. Hence, supervisors are overwhelmed.*' [HEI-06]

Participant HEI-05 further added that;

'*Some of the challenges to implementing some policies include a shortage of staff, insufficient funds to meet the demand of some policies and less time allocation to research.*'

Among the participants who highlighted the lack of materials and equipment, one clearly revealed, I *refer to the policies on what to be taught, and I have seen that the university does not have enough materials such as laboratory equipment and course modules in most courses. Most lecturers teach what they want to.'* [HEI-04]

4.3. Unqualified Staffing

Most participants expressed concern over engaging unqualified staff. The major focus was on emphasizing the need to employ staff who are suitable for the job through matching qualifications, expertise, and experience. One of the participants' asserts that

'*Most of the employees are not qualified or they are not employed according to their standard of qualification; hence, there is poor and non-standardized service and delivery.'* [HEI-03]

4.4. Inefficient Technologies

Two issues, namely the e-payment system and biometrics, were seen to pose a challenge in helping to fulfill the mandate of quality assurance policies. An electronic payment system was identified to affect both the teaching and learning process. A participant lamented;

'*The newly introduced mode of payment of tuition fees and other fees is very inconveniencing because the system is very bad. Payments reflect late, thereby affecting learning and attendance of students.'* [HEI-01]

Another participant who highlighted both challenges on the e-payment system and biometrics emphasized that, '*the newly introduced payment method is a challenge because they are ineffective, hence affecting the teaching and learning process. The issue of the biometric is very inefficient and it delays lessons and causes students to get disturbed.*' [HEI-03]

The study found four critical factors affecting quality assurance policies, namely governance problems, inadequate resources, unqualified staffing, and inefficient technology.

On governance problems, issues such as poor communication and lack of policy reviews were prominent. The study revealed gaps in communication between management, members of staff, and students concerning quality assurance and procedures. The lack of clear communication on quality assurance processes may lead to inconsistent implementation of academic policies, affecting accreditation standards and student satisfaction. Schindler, L., et al. (2015) emphasize the need for effective communication on quality assurance through use of various digital tools to enhance real-time message delivery to staff and other stakeholders. It is also clear that without proper communication, policy reviews become ineffective and fail to achieve their intended purpose.

On inadequate resources, the study revealed staff shortages and a lack of material and equipment. This could be necessitated by the need for the universities to meet various operational costs using funds generated through one source. Bwalya (2023) agreed to these findings when he noted that the quality assurance process is affected by numerous factors, such as inadequate funding, infrastructure, a shortage of qualified staff, and a lack of standalone quality assurance units. Garwe (2014) added that financial constraints and poor corporate governance are critical to the failures of most private universities.

The study further revealed unqualified staffing within the universities. While some among staff members had qualifications, it was revealed that the majority had papers that were not in line with the programmes they were hired to teach. This is a critical mismatch that affects quality assurance.

Lastly, the study revealed inefficient technology affecting quality assurance in universities. Technological challenges have impacted students in two significant ways. First, the online payment system has proven ineffective in updating students' accounts after payments, leading to delays in accessing essential academic services such as course registration and examination clearance (Adebayo, 2021). This inefficiency often forces students to make multiple visits to administrative offices, increasing frustration and reducing academic productivity.

Challenges related to the biometric system used by universities have resulted in delays in class attendance tracking and student authentication. Some institutions rely on fingerprint scanners and facial recognition systems, but frequent technical failures, network instability, and power outages have led to inaccuracies in attendance records and disruptions in academic activities (Mugisha et al., 2022). As a result, students experience delays in starting classes, and lecturers face difficulties in enforcing

attendance policies, ultimately affecting overall learning outcomes. Addressing these technological inefficiencies is crucial for enhancing institutional quality assurance and improving student experiences.

5. MEASURES TO ENSURE INSTITUTIONAL COMPLIANCE WITH QUALITY ASSURANCE POLICIES

In response to major factors affecting quality assurance policy attainment in private universities, four key measures were identified, namely improving communication as a means of providing access to available quality assurance policies, increasing resource allocation, providing efficient technology, and employing qualified staff.

5.1. Improved communication as means of providing access to available quality assurance policies

Participants felt the need to have access to critical documents such as institutional policies driving quality assurance affairs. An emphasis was made regarding improved communication as a means of informing or championing awareness among staff and students. One participant said,

'Through disseminating policy documents to all key offices for easy access and establishing quality assurance offices. The holding of regular workshops and seminars on quality assurance is also important in improving access.' [HEI-07]

Another participant also added:

'The university should make sure to communicate effectively with students and staff about what is happening in university, especially issues regarding quality assurance policies.' [HEI-04]

5.2. Increase Resource Allocation

Participants noted the need by universities to increase resource allocation. This was seen as one way through which human resource increase and infrastructure development can be realized. One of the participants said,

'The university should employ more staff who will help to implement the quality assurance policies and the school should invest in infrastructure development.' [HEI-09]

Another participant lamented on the need for infrastructure development to ensure quality, the participant said, the *university should invest/improve the infrastructure or reduce on the number of student enrolled per semester to ensure quality as par policy as directed by Higher Education Authority.'* [HEI-02]

5.3. Provide Efficient Technology

Findings revealed that to overcome the technological challenges noted by participants, universities should provide efficient technological systems. The systems include a workable payment system as well as efficient biometric access to lectures. One participant added;

'Provide internet access 24/7 for students and also provide a working payment system. Improved internet access will ensure timely update on students' portal when payments have been made, thereby providing non-delayment to class attendance. [HEI-10]

5.4. Employment of Qualified Staffs

The study revealed the need for the universities to employ qualified staff, who are charged with the responsibility to formulate and implement quality assurance policies. This was seen as a way through which to ensure compliance with Higher Education Authority standards. One of the participants said,

'The university should try and include all faculties when making policies and ensure that skilled and qualified staffs are part of the formulation and implementation of quality assurance policies.' [HEI-06]

The study identified four areas that require improvement as a way of ensuring institutional quality assurance adherence. One of the issues is improved communication as a means of providing access to available quality assurance policies. The study revealed an urgent need for timely communication on available policies and any other administrative documents to ensure awareness among all concerned stakeholders. Improved communication fosters participation during reviews or workshops for quality assurance policies.

The study also revealed the need to increase resource allocation to allow for employment of new members of staff to comply with lecturer-student ratio as guided by quality assurance policies. In

addition, the need to improve infrastructure was highlighted. Through increased resource allocation, participants felt that the move would solve infrastructure issues, which also indirectly attract students, hence increasing revenue generation for the universities.

Accordingly, the study revealed the need for the provision of efficient technology. This is a necessity in ensuring the delivery of quality education as well as providing efficient services to students. Blended learning, e-material access, research, and many other academic activities depend on efficient technology.

Lastly, the study revealed the need to employ qualified staff whose qualifications are streamlined with the programmes or courses taught. This ensures the delivery of quality education as those mandated to teach have authority in the field. While efficient technology and the need to employ qualified staff were identified as standalone measures in addressing institutional compliance with quality assurance guidelines, it can be noted that they are both dependent on an increase in resource allocation.

6. CONCLUSION

The study examined quality assurance compliance in private universities in Lusaka district, Zambia. The study established the existence of 8 critical policies, with the library policy recording a slightly higher level of compliance. The study further established that the main factors affecting compliance with quality assurance are a lack of resources such as monetary, infrastructure, and human resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Higher Education Authority and other Quality Assurance bodies should intensify their monitoring visits to ensure sanity in the academic quality assurance. In other words, they should have unannounced random visits to Higher Education Institutions, or Higher Education Authority should put in place mechanisms that will enforce universities to have a compliance obligation to the set guidelines and circulars. Also, Higher Education Institutions should put in place internal controls to monitor various faculties, lecturers, and students.

- Higher Education Authority and other Quality Assurance bodies should provide policy advice and support to guide the institutions in developing appropriate academic structures, in promoting effective and relevant methods of teaching, and in generating research to maximize the contribution of tertiary education to national needs.

- he quality assurance officers should be given adequate resources to work with. This is because staff competences will be upgraded through regular training and workshops to reflect contemporary issues in quality assurance.

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