

Strengthening Quality Assurance in Zambia's Higher Education System: Regulatory Evolution, Accreditation Practice, and Institutional Capacity

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ABSTRACT

Zambia's higher education (HE) sector has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade, marked by rapid expansion, increased enrolment, and the emergence of numerous private institutions. This growth, while promising for national development, has raised critical concerns about the consistency and quality of academic provision. In response, the Government of Zambia enacted the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013, establishing the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as an autonomous regulatory body tasked with overseeing institutional registration, programme accreditation, and quality assurance (QA) across the sector. This paper critically explores the evolution of Zambia's QA architecture, with a particular focus on HEA's statutory mandate, operational mechanisms, and its role in shaping institutional behavior and academic standards.

Employing a mixed-methods approach combining policy analysis, document review, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders the study evaluates the effectiveness of HEA's interventions and the extent to which they have fostered a culture of continuous improvement. It also examines the integration of internal QA systems within higher education institutions (HEIs), the alignment of national standards with regional and international benchmarks, and the challenges that persist in implementation. Key findings highlight the need for sustained capacity-building, improved data systems, and strategic partnerships with education agency providers to enhance QA outcomes. As Zambia's HE sector continues to diversify, the study argues that a resilient, transparent, and globally aligned QA framework will be essential to ensuring academic integrity, institutional credibility, and long-term sustainability in an increasingly competitive and interconnected educational landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Zambia's higher education (HE) landscape has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade, driven by increased demand for tertiary education, demographic shifts, and national development priorities. The sector has witnessed the rapid emergence of private higher education institutions (HEIs), a surge in student enrollment, and a diversification of academic programmes aimed at meeting evolving labor market needs. While this expansion signals progress toward broader access and inclusivity, it has simultaneously raised pressing concerns about the consistency of academic standards, quality of education, institutional capacity to deliver quality education, and the adequacy of regulatory oversight mechanisms and frame work.

Recognizing these challenges, the Parliament of Zambia enacted the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013, which established the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as an autonomous regulatory body. This legislative move marked a pivotal shift from ministerial oversight to a formalized quality assurance (QA) system anchored in statutory standards, institutional audits, and programme accreditation procedures. The HEA was vested with the authority to register HEIs, evaluate academic programmes, and enforce compliance with national QA benchmarks, thereby promoting accountability and continuous improvement across the sector.

This study critically explores the evolution and implementation of Zambia's QA framework, with a particular focus on HEA's regulatory mandate and operational mechanisms. It explores how the framework has influenced institutional behavior, shaped programme design, and contributed to the development of internal QA systems

within HEIs. By analyzing policy documents, accreditation data, and stakeholder perspectives, the study provides insights into the strengths and limitations of the current QA regime and offers recommendations for enhancing its effectiveness in a rapidly changing educational environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

To comprehensively assess Zambia's evolving quality assurance (QA) framework in higher education, a mixed methods research design was employed. This approach allowed for triangulation of data from multiple sources, ensuring both breadth and depth in understanding the structural and experiential dimensions of QA implementation. The integration of qualitative and documentary analysis enabled the study to capture not only the formal regulatory architecture but also the lived experiences of stakeholders engaged in accreditation and institutional quality management.

This design was particularly suited to the study's objectives, which included evaluating the effectiveness of the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) regulatory mechanisms, identifying implementation challenges, and exploring opportunities for system-wide improvement. By combining empirical insights with policy analysis, the study offers a nuanced perspective on Zambia's QA landscape.

Data Sources

The study drew on both primary and secondary data sources to ensure a robust evidence base.

1. **Primary Data:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 key informants selected through purposive sampling. These included senior officials from the HEA, quality assurance officers at various higher education institutions (HEIs), and experienced peer reviewers involved in accreditation processes. The interviews explored perceptions of the accreditation system, institutional readiness, procedural clarity, and challenges encountered during implementation. Respondents also shared insights on internal QA practices and the alignment between institutional processes and HEA standards.
2. **Secondary Data:** A systematic review of relevant legal and policy documents was undertaken. This included the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013, which provides the statutory mandate for HEA; the Zambia Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ZSG-QA), which operationalize accreditation criteria; HEA accreditation reports; and documentation from regional QA workshops facilitated by UNESCO and other partners. These sources provided critical context for understanding the regulatory framework and its evolution over time.

Analytical Framework

Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data, guided by a conceptual framework built around four core dimensions of quality assurance:

1. **Regulatory Clarity and Legal Mandate:** Examining the coherence and comprehensiveness of the legal provisions underpinning HEA's operations.
2. **Institutional Capacity and Readiness:** Assessing the ability of HEIs to implement internal QA systems and respond to external accreditation requirements.
3. **Procedural Transparency and Consistency:** Evaluating the clarity, fairness, and reliability of accreditation processes and decision-making.
4. **Regional and International Alignment:** Exploring Zambia's engagement with regional QA bodies and international accreditation standards.

This framework facilitated the identification of strengths, gaps, and opportunities within Zambia's QA system, providing a structured lens through which to interpret findings.

REGULATORY & ACCREDITATION FOUNDATIONS

Legal Mandate

The Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013 serves as the cornerstone of Zambia's QA system. It formally established the HEA as an autonomous regulatory body, tasked with overseeing the registration and accreditation of HEIs and their academic programmes. Key provisions of the Act include:

1. The registration and regulation of higher education institutions
2. The accreditation of learning programmes based on defined quality standards
3. The issuance of statutory forms and procedures for accreditation applications

These legal instruments provide HEA with the authority to enforce compliance, monitor institutional performance, and ensure that academic offerings meet national development priorities. Mr. Mwape Director Distance education and Former Registrar for Cavendish University indicated that operationalization of HEA should be non-selective in enforcing the legal frame work and indicated that the perception is that government institutions are not subjected to the same scrutiny when looking at standards. Subsidiary regulations and the ZSG-QA further operationalize these mandates, offering detailed criteria and procedural guidelines for evaluating institutional and programme quality. This legal infrastructure have been instrumental in promoting consistency, transparency, and accountability across the sector.

Accreditation Criteria

HEA's accreditation process is designed to be rigorous, multidimensional, and evidence-based. Institutions seeking accreditation must demonstrate compliance across several key domains:

1. **Curriculum Design and Learning Outcomes:** Programmes must articulate clear objectives, learning outcomes, and alignment with national qualifications frameworks. Prof Kalasa of Rockview University intimated that this is both institutional registration and programme accreditation whether programme meets academia and quality benchmarking is a very important element in curriculum design.
2. **Assessment Strategies and Moderation Mechanisms:** Institutions must implement robust assessment systems that ensure fairness, reliability, and continuous improvement.
3. **Faculty Qualifications and Staff Development:** Academic staff must possess relevant qualifications and participate in ongoing professional development.
4. **Infrastructure, Facilities, and Learning Resources:** Adequate physical and digital infrastructure must be in place to support teaching, learning, and research.
5. **Student Support Services and Welfare:** Institutions must provide comprehensive support services, including academic advising, counseling, and career guidance.

Applicants submit structured documentation addressing these domains, which is then reviewed by trained peer reviewers using ZSG-QA benchmarks. The process emphasizes both compliance and developmental feedback, encouraging institutions to engage in continuous quality enhancement. HEA has indeed improved and enhanced quality of education in HE indicated by quality assurance officer Mr. Mubanga Rockview University.

Integrated QA Processes

One of the strengths of Zambia's QA framework is its integrated approach to institutional audits and programmelevel accreditation. The ZSG-QA explicitly outlines how HEA uses standards to assess both governance structures and academic offerings. This dual focus ensures that institutional systems such as leadership, strategic planning, and resource management—are evaluated alongside the quality of individual programmes.

By harmonizing these processes, HEA promotes systemic coherence and avoids fragmented assessments. Institutions are encouraged to align their internal QA mechanisms with external expectations, fostering a culture of accountability and continuous improvement. This integration also facilitates more efficient use of resources and enhances the credibility of accreditation outcomes.

FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT & CAPACITY BUILDING

National Planning Study

A pivotal contribution to Zambia's QA development was the 2019 study by Simukanga & Jacob, which analyzed the policy context and design considerations for a national accreditation framework. The study underscored several critical needs:

1. **Clearly Defined Standards and Benchmarks:** To ensure consistency and comparability across institutions and programmes.
2. **Competent and Impartial Peer Reviewers:** To uphold the integrity and credibility of accreditation decisions.
3. **Transparent and Consistent Procedures:** To build trust among stakeholders and facilitate institutional compliance.

Drawing on comparative lessons from established QA agencies in Africa and beyond, the study positioned HEA as the central coordinating hub for quality assurance. It also highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement, capacity-building, and data-driven decision-making in sustaining a robust QA system.

HEA Capacity Initiatives

In response to the findings of the planning study and ongoing sectoral needs, HEA has implemented several capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening institutional QA capabilities:

1. **Accreditation Refresher Workshops:** Targeted training sessions for HEI staff to deepen understanding of accreditation standards and processes.
2. **Audit Review Seminars:** Forums for sharing best practices in institutional self-assessment and external audit preparation.
3. **Publication of QA Handbooks and Guidelines:** Centralized resources hosted in HEA's "Standards and Guidelines" repository to support consistent practice across institutions.

These initiatives have contributed to a shared understanding of QA expectations, improved institutional readiness, and enhanced compliance with accreditation requirements. They also serve as platforms for peer learning and professional development, fostering a community of practice among QA professionals.

DATA & ACCREDITATION OUTCOMES

By September 2023, the HEA had accredited a total of 1,145 learning programmes across both public and private HEIs. This milestone was formally announced through Gazette Notice No. 734 of 2 June 2023, signaling the scale and maturity of Zambia's QA system. The volume and diversity of accredited programmes reflect the system's growing throughput and institutional engagement.

These data offer a valuable baseline for longitudinal analysis and strategic planning. Key dimensions for analysis include:

1. **Academic Discipline:** Understanding which fields of study are most represented and identifying gaps in provision.
2. **Type of Provider:** Comparing accreditation outcomes between public and private institutions to assess equity and quality.
3. **Geographic Region:** Mapping programme distribution to identify regional disparities and inform resource allocation.

Such analyses can inform national policy decisions, guide institutional development strategies, and support targeted interventions to address systemic challenges. They also provide evidence for benchmarking and international reporting, enhancing Zambia's visibility in global QA dialogues.

REGIONAL & INTERNATIONAL QUALITY RECOGNITION

UNESCO & Regional Bodies

Since 2018, Zambia has actively participated in regional quality assurance (QA) initiatives facilitated by UNESCO and other continental bodies. These engagements have played a pivotal role in strengthening the institutional capacity of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), fostering regional benchmarking, and embedding Zambia's QA system within broader continental dialogues. UNESCO's support has included technical workshops, peer learning exchanges, and harmonization efforts aimed at aligning QA practices across Southern Africa.

These activities have enabled Zambia to:

1. **Strengthen HEA's Institutional Capacity:** Through targeted training and exposure to international best practices, HEA has enhanced its operational efficiency and strategic planning capabilities.
2. **Facilitate Regional Benchmarking and Good-Practice Exchange:** Zambia has benefited from comparative analyses with neighboring countries, enabling it to refine its QA standards and procedures.
3. **Embed QA within Continental Dialogues:** Participation in regional forums has positioned Zambia as an active contributor to the African QA discourse, promoting mutual recognition and mobility of qualifications.

The continuation of these efforts through 2025 underscores Zambia's commitment to regional integration and quality enhancement. By aligning its QA framework with regional norms, Zambia is not only improving domestic standards but also enhancing the credibility and portability of its qualifications across borders.

International Accreditation and Global Visibility

In addition to regional efforts, Zambia has made strides in aligning its QA system with international standards. A notable example is Unicaf University's Zambia campus, which holds accreditation from the British Accreditation Council (BAC), a UK-based QA agency. BAC accreditation is recognized globally as a mark of quality, indicating that an institution meets rigorous standards in governance, academic delivery, and student support.

Unicaf's BAC accreditation serves multiple strategic purposes:

1. **Signals Alignment with International Standards:** It demonstrates that Zambian institutions can meet globally accepted benchmarks, enhancing trust among international partners and students.
2. **Enhances Zambia's Global QA Credibility:** International endorsements contribute to the country's reputation as a provider of quality higher education.
3. **Supports Student Mobility and Recognition:** Graduates from BAC-accredited institutions are more likely to have their qualifications recognized abroad, facilitating further study and employment opportunities.

While Unicaf asserts exclusivity in holding BAC accreditation within Zambia, BAC confirms Unicaf's status without making exclusivity claims. Regardless, such international recognitions are valuable assets in Zambia's broader strategy to position itself as a competitive player in the global higher education market.

INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEMS (IQA)

A cornerstone of Zambia's QA framework is the expectation that higher education institutions (HEIs) maintain robust internal quality assurance (IQA) systems. These systems are essential for ensuring that institutions continuously monitor, evaluate, and improve their academic offerings and support services. Under the Zambia Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ZSG-QA), HEIs are required to implement comprehensive IQA mechanisms that complement external accreditation processes.

Key components of effective IQA systems include:

1. **Regular Curriculum Review and Renewal:** Programmes must undergo periodic evaluation to ensure relevance, alignment with industry needs, and integration of emerging knowledge.
2. **Assessment Moderation and Feedback Mechanisms:** Institutions must establish procedures for reviewing assessment practices, ensuring fairness, consistency, and constructive feedback.
3. **Staff Development and Performance Appraisal:** Continuous professional development and systematic evaluation of academic staff are critical for maintaining teaching quality.
4. **Data-Informed Decision-Making and Enhancement Planning:** Institutions are expected to collect and analyze data on student performance, satisfaction, and progression to inform strategic improvements.

In June 2025, HEA partnered with the Commonwealth of Learning to convene a national IQA workshop involving 37 HEIs. The workshop focused on aligning internal QA practices with HEA's external expectations, thereby strengthening the internal-external QA loop. Participants shared experiences, identified common challenges, and explored strategies for embedding QA into institutional culture. This initiative marked a significant step toward fostering a culture of continuous improvement and accountability within Zambian HEIs.

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

Key Challenges

Despite commendable progress in establishing a national QA framework, several challenges continue to hinder its full realization:

1. **Institutional Capacity:** Many HEIs, particularly newer or smaller institutions, lack dedicated QA units or adequately trained personnel. This results in uneven implementation of QA practices and limited ability to respond effectively to external accreditation requirements.
2. **Resource Constraints:** Financial and infrastructural limitations pose significant barriers to effective QA operations. Institutions in rural areas or with limited funding struggle to maintain the facilities, staffing, and systems necessary for quality delivery.
3. **Peer Reviewer Shortage:** The pool of qualified peer reviewers remains relatively small, affecting the timeliness, consistency, and credibility of accreditation decisions. Limited availability of reviewers also places strain on HEA's capacity to conduct thorough evaluations.

These challenges underscore the need for targeted interventions to build institutional resilience and enhance the overall effectiveness of Zambia's QA system.

Strategic Opportunities

To address these challenges and capitalize on emerging opportunities, the following strategic actions are recommended:

1. **Consolidation of QA Guidance:** HEA should streamline its handbooks, standards, and procedural documents to reduce ambiguity and promote uniformity across institutions. A centralized repository of QA resources can support consistent interpretation and application of standards.
2. **Expansion of Reviewer Pools:** Investing in training and certification programmes for peer reviewers can help grow the reviewer base, improve evaluation quality, and reduce bottlenecks in the accreditation process. Partnerships with regional QA bodies may also facilitate reviewer exchange and capacity building.
3. **Enhanced Data Systems:** Developing centralized databases to track accreditation outcomes, institutional performance metrics, and student feedback can support evidence-based decision-making. Such systems can also facilitate monitoring, reporting, and strategic planning at both institutional and national levels.
4. **Regional Benchmarking:** Continued engagement with UNESCO and other regional platforms can enable Zambia to benchmark its QA practices against those of peer countries. This can inform policy refinement, promote mutual recognition of qualifications, and enhance regional mobility.

5. **ZAQA Integration:** Clarifying the relationship between HEA's QA processes and the Zambia Qualifications Framework administered by the Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA) is essential for coherence and mobility. Establishing clear crosswalks and collaborative mechanisms can ensure that accreditation outcomes are aligned with qualification standards and support lifelong learning pathways.

By pursuing these strategic opportunities, Zambia can strengthen its QA infrastructure, enhance institutional performance, and position itself as a leader in quality higher education within the region and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Zambia's quality assurance (QA) regime has undergone a significant evolution, transitioning from fragmented oversight to a structured, standards-driven system that is actively shaping institutional behavior and programme design. The establishment of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013 marked a pivotal moment in this transformation, introducing a formal regulatory framework that emphasizes transparency, accountability, and continuous improvement. The operationalization of the Zambia Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ZSG-QA) has further reinforced this shift, providing institutions with clear benchmarks for programme accreditation, institutional audits, and internal quality assurance (IQA) systems.

The growing volume of accredited programmes over 1,145 by September 2023 demonstrates the system's expanding reach and maturing capacity. These developments reflect increasing institutional engagement with QA processes and a broader cultural shift toward evidence-based academic governance. However, sustaining and deepening these gains will require deliberate and strategic action across multiple fronts.

First, continued investment in IQA capacity-building is essential. Institutions must be equipped with the tools, personnel, and resources to implement robust internal QA mechanisms that align with national standards and support meaningful self-assessment. This includes training QA officers, developing institutional data systems, and fostering a culture of reflective practice.

Second, stronger alignment between external QA processes and institutional data cycles is needed to ensure coherence and responsiveness. Accreditation and audit procedures should be informed by real-time institutional performance data, enabling HEA to provide targeted feedback and support. This integration will also enhance the utility of QA outcomes for institutional planning and policy development.

Third, strategic regional and international benchmarking must be prioritized to future-proof Zambia's QA standards. Engagement with regional bodies such as the Southern African Quality Assurance Network (SAQAN) and global agencies like UNESCO and the British Accreditation Council (BAC) offers valuable opportunities for mutual recognition, peer learning, and standard harmonization. These partnerships can help Zambia remain agile and competitive in a rapidly globalizing higher education landscape.

As Zambia's HE sectors continues to diversify with new providers, modalities, and disciplines emerging a resilient and responsive QA system will be critical to maintaining academic integrity, promoting pedagogical innovation, and enhancing the global credibility of Zambian qualifications. The path forward lies in consolidating existing gains, addressing persistent challenges, and embracing collaborative, forward-looking strategies that position Zambia as a regional leader in higher education quality assurance.

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