Assessing Quality Assurance Mechanisms and Challenges: A Study of Private and Public Tertiary Institutions in the Gambia

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ABSTRACT

This study compared quality assurance mechanisms in private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia, employing a convergent mixed-methods design. Data were collected from 11 out of 19 accredited institutions through surveys, interviews, and checklists guided by National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority (NAQAA) indicators. Results revealed significant differences between private and public institutions in admission criteria, physical facilities, and internal assessment. Key challenges included a limited number of Quality Assurance specialists, funding constraints, and bureaucratic delays. These findings highlight the need for targeted policy reforms to strengthen Quality Assurance systems, build institutional capacity, and streamline resource allocation processes.

Keywords: Quality Assurance Mechanisms, Tertiary Education in The Gambia, Private Tertiary Education Institutions, Public Tertiary Education Institutions

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of post secondary education institutions, particularly across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, has heightened concerns about academic quality, relevance, and sustainability. Within this context, quality assurance has emerged as a key mechanism for protecting academic standards, enhancing institutional trust, and improving student learning outcomes. According to Harvey (2024) Quality Assurance is meant to ensure that education remains "fit for purpose". Fitness for purpose entails producing competent graduates, and creating broader societal value. It has been acknowledged as a strategic transformative tool that enables institutional improvement and enhances institutional resilience and global competitiveness, thereby making it a precursor of educational goal attainment in all ramifications (Oktarina et al., 2023; Asamoah et al., 2024; Baasanjav, 2024; Durmuş Şenyapar, et al., 2024).

Quality assurance mechanisms of educational institutions are the structured systematic processes and procedures designed to ensure that all the inputs, processes, services and outputs/ outcomes of educational institutions meet established quality standards and stakeholder expectations. These practices are usually determined and monitored by national and global education frameworks (Ansah et al., 2017; European and African Union Commissions, 2024; Kayyali, 2023).

Quality assurance mechanisms are crucial for evaluating institutional performance and goals against established standards to ensure compliance in a bid to attain effectiveness of education (Williams & Harvey, 2015; Williams 2016; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; Manarbek & Kondybayeva, 2024). In the Gambia as in most other nations, quality assurance mechanisms are a prerequisite for achieving the goals of post secondary education institutions of learning, particularly as this level of education occupies a central role in human capacity building and national development globally. In The Gambian education terrain, post secondary

education is categorised into two; the tertiary education institutions and the higher education institutions. Tertiary education institutions being those post secondary education institutions which are non degree awarding such as, apprenticeship centers, professional certification schools and vocational skills acquisition centers while higher education institutions are universities (degree awarding institutions). In The Gambia, most of the post secondary education institutions fall within the category of tertiary education institutions (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], 2022; Touray & Adesopo, 2022). As encapsulated in the Gambian policy statement, the goal of tertiary education is to ensure individuals attain "self-fulfilment, personal development, and the pursuit of lifelong learning" (The Republic of The Gambia, 2014, p. 5). Tertiary education, therefore, plays a vital role in alleviating poverty, particularly in low- and medium-income countries (World Bank, 2024). However, the extent to which tertiary education can achieve personal development, self-enhancement, and socio-economic liberty depends on the qualities or standards upheld by the tertiary education provider. This therefore makes the investigation of quality assurance mechanisms as pivotal instruments of goal attainment at this level of education critical.

As formal providers of post-secondary education through public and private institutions, colleges, technical institutes, and vocational schools, tertiary education institutions must adhere to set standards of scholarship to promote academic excellence, lifelong learning, and personal development. Recognising the need for quality assurance in higher education, governments worldwide have established regulatory frameworks to maintain high educational standards.

The principal governing body of post-secondary education in The Gambia is the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science, and Technology (MoHERST) (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA] 2022). Established in 2007, MoHERST manages and coordinates higher education in The Gambia, to transform the country into a knowledge-based society (CHEA, 2022). Similarly, the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority (NAQAA), established in 2015 has the mandate to design and ensure the implementation of a quality assurance framework for high-standard education in The Gambia (Republic of The Gambia, 2019). The NAQAA framework outlined essential quality standards that tertiary education providers in The Gambia are required to follow. These cover areas such as admission criteria, availability and functionality of institutional quality assurance units, qualification of trainers, and the quality and adequacy of physical facilities.

While the NAQAA framework provides a road map for maintaining high standards, there is little empirical evidence on how the implementation of this road map may vary between private and public institutions in The Gambia. Existing studies have examined quality assurance in other contexts, but none have systematically compared adoption across Gambian tertiary education institutions. This gap may limit policymakers' ability to design targeted interventions. Therefore, this study investigated the extent to which private and public institutions in The Gambia adopted quality assurance practices and the challenges faced in assuring quality.

Quality Assurance

The concept of 'quality" in quality assurance is timeless, it has found usage in contemporary times (Misztal & Ratajszczak, 2025). In modern-day use, quality has become a hallmark of excellence (Anttila & Jussila, 2019). Anttila and Jussila (2017) noted that the concept of quality depicts the level of conformity to a set rule, where variations are categorised with prefixes such as low and high. A synthesis of these conceptualisations shows that the understanding of quality, from the philosophical and idealist narratives to a standards-based measurement, has shaped how it is operationalised today.

Building upon the foundational understanding of 'quality', several works have described quality assurance. Among these, there is a consistent assertion that quality assurance is the process by which a product or service is evaluated to meet the highest standard (William, 2016; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018; Tight, 2020; Bhat & McCammon, 2021; Klein et al., 2023). Williams (2016) defined quality assurance as internal or external policies and processes organisations follow to maintain quality. This definition suggests that quality assurance is a self-regulatory mechanism for institutions and an external oversight imposed by regulatory bodies. Agreeing with Williams (2016), Klein et al. (2023) argued that quality assurance is a process that ensures quality is attained. Quality assurance in the light of varying definitions can be described as a quality

management process which ensures that the standard of excellence is maintained to meet or exceed it (Tight, 2020; Klein et al., 2023). The level of quality assurance implementation may vary significantly across sectors. It is, therefore, mandatory to examine quality assurance practices of the different categories of tertiary education institutions.

Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Tertiary Education

Quality assurance mechanisms in tertiary education is traceable to the movement for better quality management practices, which began in the early twentieth century (Williams & Harvey, 2015; Kayyali, 2023; Mtitu, 2025). This period was characterised by the demand for greater standardisation in education, which was largely influenced by the success of the industrial quality control model, leading to the development of frameworks to promote high standards (Williams & Harvey, 2015; Kayyali, 2023). The earliest forms of quality assurance practices in tertiary education were primarily concerned with maintaining the minimum standard of education for continuous improvement (Kayyali, 2023). Quality assurance practices have considerably evolved in response to global educational demands to encompass institutional audits and assessment reviews (Kayyali, 2023; Mtitu, 2025).

Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) assessed quality assurance in German higher education institutions and managers' perceptions of effectiveness of the institutions. Utilising Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis, the study found that quality assurance was supported among higher management, and collaboration between or among tertiary institutions of learning in Germany improved perceived level of effectiveness. Akpo and Ernst (2020) expanded the focus to public and private higher education institutions. Operating from a context that differed from Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018), Akpo and Ernst (2020) examined the perceived impact of External Quality Assurance (ESA) on private and public tertiary education institutions in Namibia. Adopting a descriptive case study approach and concurrent mixed methods, the study found a high level of awareness of the external quality assurance among tertiary education providers and a moderate impact on service delivery in Namibia.

The significance of the studies conducted by Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) and Akpo and Ernst (2020) lies in their contribution to the understanding of stakeholder perception of quality assurance and external quality assurance within the German and Namibian tertiary education institutions, providing insights into how key institutional actors engaged and viewed quality assurance mechanisms across different educational systems. However, the studies were silent on the quality assurance mechanisms. Asiyai (2020) attempted to fill the gap by assessing best practices for quality assurance in tertiary education and their effects on the Nigerian educational administration. The study discussed five core concepts: facilities, innovation, teaching, human resources, and curriculum. The study concluded that to achieve high-quality tertiary education in Nigeria, these concepts must be aligned with market demand. Utilising a narrative review approach, Bhat and McCammon (2021) examined the importance of quality assurance and quality improvement in Low and Middle Income Countries. The researchers discovered that quality assurance mechanisms in Low and Middle Income Countries were limited but growing steadily. Some of the identified barriers to quality assurance mechanisms were found to be resource limitations, training disparities, and inadequate funding.

In a study undertaken by Arthur and Kuranchie (2022) on quality assurance practices and challenges encountered therein in private universities in Ghana, it was found that quality assurance practices, adopted as part of strategic performance management activities, utilised both internal and external mechanisms. The study showed that private tertiary universities established internal mechanisms such as the establishment of functional quality assurance units, manned by senior level academic staff to systematically monitor institutional activities, thus ensuring alignment of such activities with organizational objectives; strict adherence to regulatory bodies criteria for student enrollment, staff recruitment, development and promotion; utilization of students' feedback for academic staff assessment, tracer studies for monitoring graduates' perception of utility of knowledge acquired in the universities for work place effectiveness. This included employer performance of graduates' work place performance. The quality assurance practices adopted by the universities, comprised compliance with mentoring universities', national and international regulatory frameworks that institutions must comply with to avoid sanctions. The study found two categories of challenges to quality assurance practices in Ghanaian private universities. These were: External and Internal

related challenges. External related challenges, emanated from mentoring universities and regulatory bodies; in form of irregular supervisory visits to the universities, high cost of supervision and bureaucratic bottlenecks. Internal related challenges were: bureaucratic bottlenecks, inadequate personnel for effective running of the institutional quality assurance units, insufficient facilities and funds. In a similar study, Appau et al. (2022) investigated quality assurance practices among private Colleges of Education in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The study found that quality assurance mechanisms contributed to achieving the corporate mission and vision of private colleges.

Although studies from Germany, Namibia, Nigeria, Ghana, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan provided insights into quality assurance implementation, they cannot be directly applied to the Gambian context due to differing systems and regulations. No study to date has systematically compared the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms across private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia. This study thus addressed that gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was hinged on the stakeholder theory of Freeman (1984) and the resource dependence theory of Pfeffer and Salancik (1978). The Stakeholder Approach, presented a broad view approach to organizational management. The theory challenged the opinion that the sole reason for the existence of organisations was to generate profit for the owner/s. It opined that business owners or founders were not the only entities with interests in the success or failure of such organisations; Freedman (1984) termed entities with an interest in such organisations 'stakeholders'. A stakeholder, therefore, has become known as someone, an organisation, or a body with an interest in the existence of another organisation (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022). Stakeholder theory highlighted how diverse groups of students, staff, government, and society place demands on tertiary institutions, influencing their adoption of quality assurance practices. Resource dependence theory complements this by explaining how institutions' reliance on external resources, particularly government funding and accreditation of regulatory bodies, shape their behaviour. Together, these frameworks provided a lens to interpret why private institutions, facing higher survival pressure, may adopt quality assurance mechanisms more rigorously than public institutions that rely on state support.

Objectives of the Study, Research Questions and Research Method

Objectives of the Study

To fill the identified gap, the study:

1. Compared the quality assurance mechanisms adopted by private and tertiary institutions in The Gambia; and Identified the challenges to quality assurance mechanisms in private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. How does adoption of quality assurance mechanisms differ in private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia?
2. What are the challenges to quality assurance mechanisms in private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia?

Hypothesis

The following research hypothesis was formulated to guide the study:

Hoi There is no significant difference between the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms in private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia.

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Research Method

The study adopted the parallel convergent mixed method research design to address the stated objectives. This design facilitated data collection from participants through direct engagement. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data from the sample created a complementary methodological framework where the limitation of one was mitigated by the strength of the other. Hence, the parallel convergent design aided a thorough evaluation of the quality assurance practices of private and public tertiary institutions in the Gambia.

The population for the study comprised all 19 registered and accredited non degree awarding institutions in The Gambia. These institutions had been accredited by the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority (NAQAA) to offer courses in Accounting, Banking and Finance, Business Management, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Electrical Installation, Travel and Tourism. Due to the small population, the study utilised a sample size consisting of all the tertiary institutions. The sample consisted of all the 11 Heads of institutions, two trainers from each of the institutions and all eight members of the NAQAA Technical Unit that gave consent to participate in the study.

Three research instruments: a questionnaire, an interview guide and a checklist were used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire, designed by the researchers using the NAQAA specifications as guidelines, validated by experts and had a reliability index of 0.82 was administered on Tertiary Institutional Heads and Trainers. The instrument for collection of qualitative data was an interview guide designed by the researchers. The researchers assured the credibility of the interview guide by using different perspectives:interviews, observations, as well as the NAQAA Act and The Gambian Tertiary and Higher Education National Policy to verify aspects of reality as presented by the participants of the study. Credibility being a criterion of trustworthiness (equivalent to internal validity for qualitative instruments) according to Bryman (2012).

The interview guide was used to gather data from the members of the NAQAA technical team. These information was utilised for assessment of quality assurance practices of tertiary institutions as perceived by the monitoring NAQAA Officials. The checklist was used to ascertain availability, adequacy and functionality of resources within the institutions.

Results

The results from the analysis of data collected for the study are presented based on the research question formulated and the hypothesis raised.

How does the adoption of Qquality Aassurance Mechanisms differ in private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia?

Table 1: Mean Analysis of adoption of Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Private and Public Tertiary Institutions in The Gambia

Indicator	N		Mean		Std. Deviation		Std. Error Mean	
	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public
AIQAU	8	3	7.13	6.00	0.99	2.00	0.35	1.5
FIQAU	8	3	9.88	9.67	0.35	0.58	0.13	0.33
AC	8	3	11.88	11.00	0.35	1.00	0.13	0.58
QT	8	3	11.75	11.33	0.71	1.15	0.25	0.67
QAPFs	8	3	15.13	13.33	0.83	1.53	0.30	0.88
IMIA	8	3	16.00	14.33	0.00	2.08	0.00	1.20

Key: Availability of Institutional Quality Assurance Units (AIQAU); Functionality of Institutional Quality Assurance Units (FIQAU); Admission Criteria (AC); Qualification of Trainers (QT); Quality and Adequacy of Physical Facilities (QAPF); and Institutional Moderation of Internal Assessment (IMIA).

Table 1 displayed the mean analysis of adoption of Quality Assurance Mechanisms in private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia. The data showed significant variations between the categories of institutions across the six criteria defined by NAQAA. Data analysis revealed that private institutions achieved a mean score of 7.13% compared to 6.0% of public tertiary institutions in Gambia. The 18% performance gap indicated that private tertiary institutions adopted more internal quality assurance practices to monitor and evaluate the quality of education compared to public tertiary institutions. The standard deviation of 0.99 for private tertiary institutions and 2.00 for public tertiary institutions suggested that private tertiary institutions displayed consistency in terms of availability of quality assurance units (AIQAU). The high standard error of AIQAU for public tertiary institutions showed that while some institutions had institutional quality assurance units, others did not.

Analysis of the data further showed the functionality of the institutional quality assurance units (FIQAU) in The Gambian institutions. Private tertiary institutions recorded a higher mean score of 9.88% when compared to public tertiary institutions with a mean score of 9.67%. Nevertheless, the high mean scores and the low standard deviation of 0.35 and 0.58 respectively for both categories of institutions suggested that the FIQAU in The Gambian tertiary education system was above average. The admission criteria (AD) for both categories of institutions were also assessed. The data analysis showed that private tertiary institutions ($\bar{x}$ =11.88%) outperformed public tertiary institutions ($\bar{x}$ = 11.00%) by 8% in terms of compliance with admission criteria stipulated by NAQAA. The standard deviation (s =0.35 for private and s =1.0 for public institutions) further showed that private tertiary institutions in The Gambia observed stricter compliance levels with NAQAA stipulated admission criteria when compared to public tertiary institutions.

The analysis of data on Quality of Trainers (QT) showed a mean score of 11.75%($\bar{x}$ =11.75%) for private tertiary institutions and 11.33% ($\bar{x}$ = 11.33%) for public tertiary institutions. The standard deviation for both categories of institutions was 0.75 and 1.15. The Quality and Adequacy of Physical Facilities (QAPF) scores showed substantial differences, with 13.3% recorded for private tertiary institutions and 15.13% for public tertiary institutions. The Institutional Moderation of Internal Assessment (IMIA) recorded a mean score of 16.00% and a standard deviation of 0.00 for private institutions compared to a mean score of 14.33% and a standard deviation of 2.03% for public tertiary institutions.

What are the challenges of Quality Assurance Mechanisms?

To answer this research question, data collected by means of the open-ended items of the questionnaire administered on institutional heads were collated and analysed. Analysis of the the data showed that the most common challenge encountered by both categories of institutions was the inability of the institutions to attract and recruit adequate number of quality assurance specialists. Other challenges identified were inadequacy of funds to invest in physical structures and maintain existing facilities, bottlenecks in obtaining government support and delays in releasing approved funds, a shortage of quality assurance personnel, and incompetence (resulting from lack of sufficient training) in implementing NAQAA stipulated Quality Assurance Mechanisms.

4.3 There is no significant difference between the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms in private tertiary institutions and the adoption of quality assurance practices in public tertiary institutions in The Gambia.

The hypothesis, There is no significant difference between the quality assurance mechanisms adopted in private tertiary institutions and quality assurance practices adopted in public tertiary institution in The Gambia was tested at 0.05 level of significance. The results of the analysis of data is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Quality Assurance Mechanisms adopted by Private and Public Institutions

Indicator	Institution Type	N	Mean	SD	Df	t	p
AIQA	Private	8	7.13	0.99	9	1.29	0.23
	Public	3	6.00	2.00			
FIQA	Private	8	9.88	0.35	9	0.74	0.48
	Public	3	9.67	0.58			
AC	Private	8	11.88	0.35	9	2.29	0.04
	Public	3	11.00	1.00			
QT	Private	8	11.75	0.71	9	0.74	0.48
	Public	3	11.00	1.00			
QAPF	Private	8	15.13	0.83	9	2.57	0.03
	Public	3	11.33	1.15			
IMIA	Private	8	16.00	0.00	9	2.51	0.03
	Public	3	13.33	1.53			

The results from the hypothesis testing showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the Quality Assurance Mechanisms of private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia, in terms of Admission Criteria (AC) with a p-value of 0.04, Quality and Adequacy of Physical Facilities (QAPF) with a p-value of 0.03, and Institutional Moderation of Internal Assessment (IMIA) with a p-value value of 0.03. Other Quality Assurance Mechanisms, such as Availability of Institutional Quality Assurance Units (AIQAU), Functionality of Institutional Quality Assurance Units (FIQAU), and Qualification of Trainers (QT), showed no statistical significant difference at 0.05 level of significance.

DISCUSSIONS

The results from the comparative analysis of the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms in private and public tertiary institutions in the Gambia showed that The Gambian Government, through the governing umbrella of NAQAA, had taken steps to ensure minimum educational standards. This finding aligns with the observations of Williams and Harvey (2015), Kayyali (2023), and Mtitu (2025) that quality assurance mechanisms have evolved from quality control mechanisms to wider institutional audits and reviews for standardization. The finding of this study substantiates the claim by showing that moderate to high level of compliance existed in terms of adoption of the key quality assurance mechanism indicators designed by NAQAA. However, the study found that on the average, private institutions in The Gambia displayed greater adoption of quality assurance mechanisms compared to public tertiary institutions, probably because of the fear of closure in relation to the precepts of the stakeholder theory which shows that though the private institutions are owned by individuals and groups, the government of The Gambia through regulatory agencies, NAQAA and MoHERST have a stake in the institutions such that institutions that do not comply to regulations as stipulated will be shut down; to avoid the risk of closure, private institutions ensure optimal compliance with stipulated regulations.The higher level of compliance by the private institutions could also be explained with the resource dependence theory which posited that such institutions are dependent on external resources. If a tertiary institution does not achieve full accreditation, it will be difficult for such an institution to get the requisite number of students or seek for government financial support to keep such an institution afloat while in the case of public institutions, the government is the major financier that must provide resources to keep the

institutions functional and as a result can not shirk the responsibility of providing resources to the institutions that depend on it for survival.The risk of closure according to the analysis of data collected, is lower for public institutions as they are owned by the government which employs officials of regulatory agencies; it may be difficult to shut down Government owned institutions. This finding is consistent with that of Aburizaizah (2022) and Khan et al. (2024), who found differences in the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms across institutional types in Saudi Arabian and Pakistan, respectively. Notwithstanding, the insight from the data, which showed that private tertiary institutions had stronger internal quality assurance structures, measured by the mean score of Availability of Institutional Quality Assurance Unit (AIQAU), corroborates the finding of Seyfried and Pohlenz (2018) that high management support for quality assurance promotes greater perception and impact of quality assurance in tertiary education.The stronger adoption of quality assurance mechanisms by private institutions can be linked to their reliance on market competitiveness and accreditation survival, a position related to the resource dependence theory. Unlike public institutions, which often depend on state support, private providers must consistently demonstrate compliance to attract students and avoid closure. This may explain the performance gap observed in admission criteria and internal assessment. The findings from the qualitative data showed that private and public tertiary institutions in The Gambia faced similar and significant challenges in the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms. The foremost challenge was the inability to attract and recruit qualified quality assurance specialists to assist with quality assurance practices implementation. This finding is in line with that of Bhat and McCammon (2021), also Arthur and Kuranchie (2022) who found that although quality implementation was growing drastically, it was still hindered by insufficiency of resources and training barriers. Furthermore, the finding from Aburizaizah (2022), and Arthur and Kuranchie (2022) that government bureaucracy limited institutional creativity agrees with the finding of the current study that the bottlenecks in obtaining government support and delays in releasing approved funds were critical challenges limiting the adoption of quality assurance mechanisms in The Gambia. The findings also suggest that government bureaucracy and limited funding disproportionately hindered public institutions, underlining the importance of policy reforms that ensure the timely disbursement of resources and capacity-building initiatives for Quality Assurance personnel.

CONCLUSION

Quality assurance is central to the credibility and effectiveness of tertiary education in The Gambia. This study showed that while both public and private institutions adopted quality assurance mechanisms, private institutions demonstrated stronger compliance in critical areas. This might not be unconnected to market pressures of remaining credible to get more students, thus illustrating resource dependence of these category of institutions for survival. Persistent challenges such as inadequate funding, scarcity of quality assurance specialists, and bureaucratic delays threaten sustainable quality improvement.

Limitation of the Study

The limited number of institutions, 11 out of 19, that consented to participation in this study, which resulted in the study not being able to adopt the total enumeration sampling might have implications for generalizability of the findings of this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Policy makers should streamline government funding through e-governance platforms to reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks.
2. Proprietors of the tertiary institutions should invest in structured quality assurance training and capacity-building workshops for staff.

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