

# Travel Claim Management on Zimbabwean Public Universities, Practice, Challenges and Opportunities: A Systematic Literature Review

White Manganda\*

Midlands State University, Gweru Zimbabwe.

\*Corresponding Author

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## ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines travel claim management practices in Zimbabwean public universities and focuses on governance effectiveness, administrative and financial accountability. Its main purpose is to review existing literature and empirical evidence on travel claim management in higher education institutions. The objectives of the study are, to synthesize existing literature on Zimbabwean Universities travel claim management and practice, to identify challenges affecting travel claim processing and reimbursement, and to examine opportunities and practice to improve travel claim management. The study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and meta-analysis (PRISMA) framework. From a pool of 116 articles extracted from Google scholar and Scopus databases 21 articles were selected for the final inclusion based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study reveals that despite growing international evidence supporting automation on travel claim management, a significant research gap exists where Zimbabwean universities rely mostly on manual systems. The findings of the systematic review revealed a persistent reliance on manual systems and a significant unacquitted travel advances. The results indicated that automation enhances compliance and improves financial transparency. This study recommends the adoption of integrated digital travel management systems.

**Keywords:** claim management, Travel claim, Reimbursement, Traveling and Subsistence

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## INTRODUCTION

Travel claim management worldwide is viewed as essential in safeguarding the resources of public tertiary institutions from misuse and promoting effective use of the institution's budgets. Tertiary institutions operate on government grants and donor funds which are released once or twice in most cases hence the need for effective travel claim management systems. Audit of the University of Texas (2020) found that 38% of travelers used unauthorized booking agencies, travelers authorized their own trips and submitted insufficient documentation for actual cost incurred. The University lost \$10 000 on cancelled flights which did not follow the required protocol. According to Emburse (2026) effective global practices for travel claim management systems strengthen financial control, efficiency and prevent abuse of universities expense like out of policy luxury purchases. The Mead Education Trust (2024) in Anti-Fraud, Bribery and Corruption found that expense claims are vulnerable, overstated and falsely claimed as well as forged signatures with falsified receipts. Mental Welfare

Commission for Scotland (2025) revealed that travelling and subsistence systems operate on trust and reimbursement expenses are abused if not supported with bona fide receipts.

Guy et al, (2014) on the research, Uses and abuses of per diems in Africa found that per diems and travelling and subsistence is in Africa used as salary supplements rather than simple expense reimbursements. Guy et al, (2014) added that abuse of per diems and traveling and subsistence created a workshop mentality where meetings and workshops moved away from the university premised for monetary gain. In South Africa research findings by Dipolelo (2025) stated that lack of financial literacy and effective travel claim management system resulted in unauthorized claims of R10,000 monthly without proof.

Zimbabwean public universities operate with constrained budgets, financial conditions and complex bureaucratic systems which calls for effective travel claim administration. Empirical evidence revealed by the Auditor - General of Zimbabwe (2022, 2023)'s report where employees were not acquitting travelling and subsistence for official trips. The same audit also revealed employees who failed to acquit traveling and subsistence advance worth ZWL 12 million (Auditor General of Zimbabwe, 2023). Auditor-General of Zimbabwe (2021) revealed that state owned enterprise by passed internal control and travel and subsistence forms lacked vital information. Given the above background the study seeks to address the following objectives:

- To synthesize existing literature on Zimbabwean Universities travel, claim management and practice.
- To identify challenges affecting travel claim processing and reimbursement.
- To examine opportunities and practice to improve travel claim management.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Travel claim management is a process of managing and reimbursing expenses incurred by employees on business trips. It consists of recording and tracking expenses by verifying claims against policies. According to O Neil (2024) travel claim management is the expense management practice that enhances compliance with financial regulations of an institution.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is a comprehensive analysis of existing theories that acts as a guide for constructing research arguments (Vinz, 2023). This study is understood through the lens of relevant theoretical frameworks identified in literature. Two prominent theories that shed light on travel claim management are Institutional theory and Agency theory. Travel claim management includes monitoring and controlling institutional resources safeguarding the resources from abuse and enforcing compliance with rules, regulations, and policies of the organization.

### Institutional Theory

This theory was developed by Selznick (1948) and is one of the most widely adopted theories which influences how organizations behave the way they do. Selznick (1948) stated that individuals and organizations independently determine what structures and practices are in an organization. Kishore (2017) revealed three concepts through the lens of institutional theory that is rules, routines, and knowledge. These concepts are vital in travel claim management where there are regulations and guidelines followed on reimbursement of traveling and subsistence as well as compliance. Claims which do not follow the procedure are rejected.

### Agency Theory

Jensen and Meckling (1976) developed agency theory, and corporate governance researchers have used it to explain and provide solutions to the agent conflict. According to Otieno (2018) a nonprofit entity can only survive and be successful when donations from various sources are used effectively. In this regard universities operate on government grants and research grants were effective and efficient management of these resources required. There is need for accountability and transparency on the resources. Travel claim process should comply

with the available policies. The university as the principal needs to monitor and control employee actions to prevent abuse of funds.

### **Empirical evidence reviews**

The section reviews literature and empirical evidence on travel claim management in higher education institutions with emphasis on Zimbabwean universities. The study review is based on its objectives with focus on international and regional studies to contextualize Zimbabwe's experience identifying gaps and improvement opportunities.

### **Travel claims management practices in Zimbabwean Universities**

Maganga and Vutete (2015) empirical evidence on corporate governance performance of Zimbabwean Universities established that travel policies are established but inconsistently applied in practice. Their study was across nine state universities in Zimbabwe. Maganga and Vutete (2015)'s findings revealed that there were poor financial management systems and biased top management favoring non-academic staff on resource allocation on travelling and subsistence.

Makwari (2018) argued that Zimbabwe universities claim management system rely on manual reimbursement processes which results in missing documents, forgery of signatures and calculation errors. Makwari (2018) argues manual systems promote reimbursement delays and audit trail challenges. The findings of the study recommended automation of travel claim management as a solution to policy compliance.

According to Chikwature and Makamache (2020), there is too much bureaucracy in Zimbabwean universities which results in delay for processing traveling and subsistence claim forms. They argue that rigidity in treasury policies is a challenge in operation implementation which disturbs flow of activities and departmental set targets.

Empirical evidence by the Auditor General of Zimbabwe (2022;2023) revealed that staff members took more than 30 days to acquit traveling and subsistence allowance and this was an indication of weak travel management system. The Auditor General's report argued that unacquitted travel advances compromised financial reporting integrity. The practice exposed institutions to fiscal risk. The Auditor General's report (2022) indicated that the University of Zimbabwe had outstanding unaccounted debtor of \$93,999 from travelling advances for over 180 days showing lack of compliance and inefficient travel management system.

### **Challenges affecting travel claim processing and reimbursement.**

A consistent argument of Zimbabwean universities empirical evidence is that of bureaucracy and cash flow constrains as primary barriers to efficient travel claim processing (Chikwature and Makamache,2020). Chikwature and Makamache (2024) argued that reimbursement was delayed by the prevailing rigid treasury system to an extent of departments failing to meet operational targets.

The empirical evidence highlighted by the Auditor General of Zimbabwe (2022) indicates a delayed acquittal of travel and subsistence allowance as a systematic challenge. In addition, staff exceeded the stipulated acquittal period showing compliance challenges of the travel policy. Auditor General (2023) argues that the weakness portrayed by the finance department reveals the absence of senior personnel which leads to prolonged outstanding claims acquittal.

Nkamleu and Kamgnia (2014) argued from a behavioral and governance perspective that African public institutions staff view per diem and travel subsistence as financial gain. The allowances are abused to an extent of creating international trips and meetings far from their premises only for financial benefit (Nkamleu and Kamgnia, 2014)

International empirical evidence reinforces these challenges (Carter et al, 2008). They further argued that manual claim systems are prone to allow errors to propagate since mistakes are detected only after submission of claims. According to Wertz (2020) at the University of Texas Audit report revealed that 38% of travelers did not use

prescribed travel claim policy and 10% did not provide supporting documents of travel trips. Wertz (2020) argued that even where systems exist, noncompliance and incomplete documentation results in monetary loss.

According to the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE,2024), expense reimbursement fraud constitutes a considerable proportion of occupational fraud cases in the education sector. The HCC international audit Department (2024) argues that inflated travel claims and forged receipts remain prevalent risk in higher education institutions globally.

### **Opportunities and practices to improve Travel claim management**

A considerable number of authors argue that automation is the most effective intervention for improving claim management systems (Wertz, 2020; Wang,2025; Mazorodze and Mkhize, 2024; Nkamleu, 2014). Makwari (2018) argues that automated reimbursement systems provide audit trails, reduce processing time and enforce policy compliance. Makwari (2018) further argues that automation systems transform reimbursement demotivating process into a productive function.

Carter et al, (2008)'s empirical evidence reveals that electronic travel claims systems validate data at entry point reducing errors and enable rapid reimbursements. Their study confirms that automation can shorten reimbursement cycle from weeks to days.

International evidence from Wang (2025) contends that universities using manual reimbursement systems process is time consuming and vulnerable to fraud. Wang (2025) argues for integrated travel platforms capable of real-time monitoring. A similar argument comes from Memorial University of Newfoundland that automation improves staff satisfaction, administrative efficiency and eliminates repetitive paperwork.

Based on a strategic point of view, Khand (2020) argues that automation enables senior management to exercise better oversight of travel expenditure and improve reporting timelines. SAP Concur case studies (2025;2026) indicate that automation of travel management strengthens cost control, fraud detection, and compliance.

Mazorodze and Mkhize (2024) argue that limited funding for academic travel undermines innovation and professional development in Zimbabwean universities. They indicated that improving travel claim systems must have institutional support on academic staff mobility.

### **Summary of literature review and empirical evidence**

The synthesized literature on travel claim management on higher education institutions is anchored by research objectives and authors arguments. The Zimbabwean researchers and audit institutions argue that manual systems, bureaucracy, and weak oversight undermine effective travel claim management. Similarly regional and international authors raise the same risk and demonstrate that automation systems improve efficiency and accountability. Lastly these arguments collectively justify the need for an empirical investigation into travel claim management in Zimbabwean universities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a systematic literature review method which is grounded in the fundamental principles of transparency, replicability, and methodological vigor (Marak and Ayyagari 2025). The review process is guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) framework (Page et al, 2020). The PRISMA guidelines provides a structured and transparent method for conducting literature review comprehensively and methodologically sound (Sivas, 2025). It accommodates a structured search of the knowledge base with a clear understanding of search parameters and gaps (Marak and Ayyagari 2025).

The PRISMA framework has four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Page et al, 2020). Relevant sources were identified using Google Scholar database. Screening stage involves removing duplicate sources, scrutiny of titles, abstract and full text to ensure relevancy. Full text is evaluated in the eligibility stage. In the last stage of inclusion, selected studies are analyzed to develop thematic insight.

## Selection of databases

In searching scholarly publications on travel claim management in public universities Scopus and Google Scholar were found to be the main sources of the scholarly literature of the review. These two databases accessibility and publication diversity contributes to their selection. Scopus and Google Scholar encompasses the majority of journal publishers and databases (Nurdiya & Rahma, 2025). It is crucial to note that Google Scholar is one of the largest scholarly sites indexing most peer reviewed online academic journals (Marwan et al. 2025). Scopus indexes a broad array of peer reviewed literature including journals, conference proceedings, books and patents (Situmorang et al. 2025). Scopus' extensive coverage and rigorous indexing standards makes it one of the most reliable and authoritative resource for researchers (Situmorang et al. 2025)

## Search strategy

The literature search was conducted across the two main databases Google Scholar and Scopus however, since these databases cover the majority of journal databases and publishers some articles from Emerald, ResearchGate and Taylor & Francis were also retrieved. In order to gather relevant studies on Travel Claim Management on Zimbabwean public universities, practice, challenges and opportunities specific search strings were used.

## Search strings

Specific search strings and filters were used to ensure precision by excluding review articles limiting results to English language publications between 2008 and 2026. The search used the strings:

("travel claim" OR "travel reimbursement" OR "expense management") AND ("Zimbabwe" AND ("university" OR "tertiary institution")) AND ("practice" OR "challenge" OR "opportunity" OR "policy").

("travel claim management") OR ("travel expense") AND ("Zimbabwe" AND "university") AND ("practice" OR "challenges" OR "opportunities")

("travel claim" OR "expense report") AND ("Zimbabwe" AND "public university" OR "state universit" AND "policy" OR "procedure" OR "guideline") The searches were done one after the other to select unique sets of studies relevant to the research scope.

## Screening and selection

The study considered 116 articles retrieved from Google Scholar and Scopus databases. The screening and selection stage also focused on studies which are: Studies that focused on travel claim management in Zimbabwe or international public universities, studies that discuss practices, opportunities or polices on tertiary institutions, and articles published in English language. The selection process was carried out to insure inclusion of relevant and high-quality articles. The studies were identified and retrieved from the databases using the same search strings on Google Scholar and Scopus. Inclusion criteria focused on papers that discussed the role of travel claim management, challenges, and opportunities. Duplicate articles resulting from the overlapping keywords in the search rounds were removed. The remaining list of articles was further reviewed for eligibility, irrelevant, off topic and non-English articles were removed.

## Quality assessment and legibility

This section aims to assess the relevance and quality of the selected studies in this systematic literature review. Each of the title and abstract is read to determine relevance of the article. Those which did not comply with this criterion were excluded. The relevance and quality of the studies were also assessed by reading the complete article. Each article was independently assessed by two people using the quality dimensions by Zuiderwijk et al (2021) and Batini et al, (2009). The researcher examined the articles on

- Accuracy: the objectives of the studies, data collection and important statements were clearly stated concerning travel claim management.

- Consistency: the research design, research objectives are answered or attained
- Completeness: the research approach of the study is sufficiently detailed.
- Timelines: The study was published in the past ten years.

The studies which did not meet this criterion were excluded. The researcher made sure the studies assessed were focusing of travel claim management on tertiary institutions.

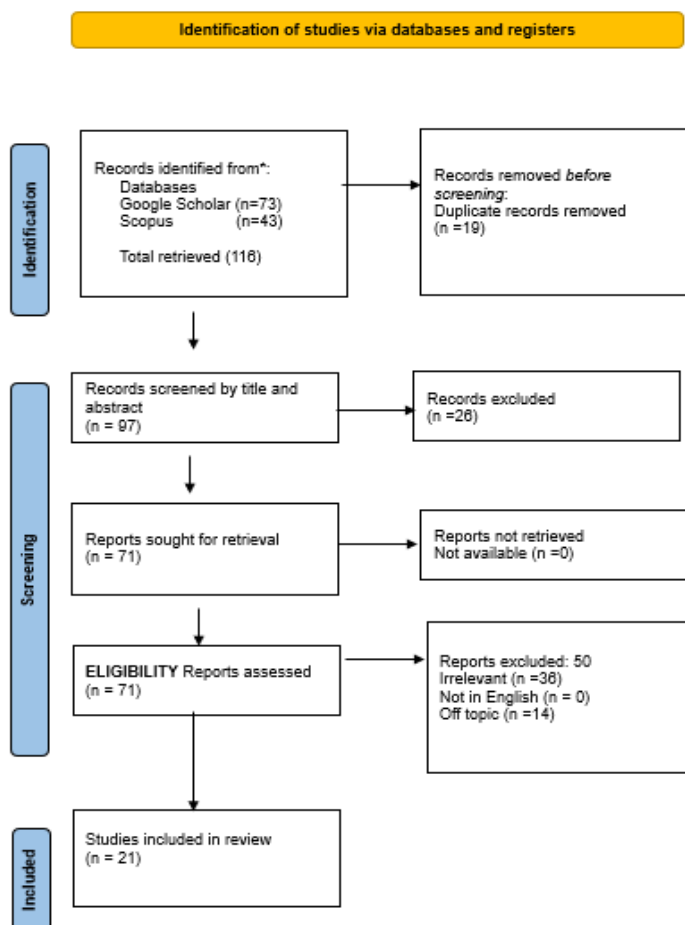
### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

21 Peer reviewed published articles and academic indexed journals in Google Scholar and Scopus were deemed eligible for inclusion. The inclusion number of 21 represents the relevant articles selected from a pool of 116 indicating that the area is under researched and the screening criteria was very specific. This is a true representation since the screening was thorough and was also applied consistently throughout the whole process.

## RESULTS

The selection and screening process adopted the principles of and adherence to PRISMA guidelines. The initial search yielded 116 relevant records based on keywords and search terms. After removing 19 duplicate records, the remaining 97 were screened based on their titles and abstracts. This initial screening excluded 26 records, resulting in 71 records for full screening. All relevant studies were read in full text by the author. A detailed review of the full articles excluded 50 records due to not meeting the inclusion criteria. Finally, 21 studies were included in the systematic review. The process of study screening through the PRISMA flowchart is illustrated in Fig 1.

Fig 1. PRISMA flow chart identification of articles used in the study



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## Qualificative synthesis

### Inefficiencies in manual travel management systems

The systematic review identified administrative inefficiency in the manual travel claim system across the included studies. Carter et al. (2008) article revealed that the University of Arkansas processed 23,000 travel claims worth \$10 million and 80% of these manual claims were rejected for noncompliance. The study by Makwari (2018) on Zimbabwe public institutions stated that reimbursement cycle of travel claims took weeks or months due to manual approval processes. Memorial University (2025) and Wang (2025) highlighted challenges of missing documents and audit complications caused by manual travel claim management systems. The collective findings on manual travel system reveal that the system is prone to error, time consuming and cost administratively.

### Compliance challenges financial governance

Literature review revealed weaknesses in governance issues and compliance with institutions travel policies. The study by Maganga and Vutere (2015) stated that the governance performance for Zimbabwean universities was slightly above the threshold revealing its weakness. The results indicated a grand mean of 2.51 against the benchmark of 2.50. Reports by Auditor General of Zimbabwe (2022, 2023) revealed unacquitted travel advances of \$93,999 of more than 180 days and staff debtors of ZWL\$4 million indicating financial governance and compliance challenges of the University of Zimbabwe. Furthermore ZWL\$1.8 million in expenditure at Gwanda State University lacked supporting documents. Weak enforcement of financial regulations, inadequate finance senior personnel and high staff turnover resulted the compliance failures. The collective findings suggest that governance deficiencies undermine accountability and financial control.

### Misuse of travel funds and fraud risk

Fraud in travel claims comes along with traveling and subsistence reimbursement in public institutions and universities. A report by internal Audit (2024) indicated travel claim reimbursement fraud on top ten risk areas in higher education with a median loss of \$50,000. According to ACFE (2024) report 17% of fraud cases in higher education involve reimbursement schemes. UTEP (2020) empirical evidence confirmed that 38% of audited travelers used unauthorized travel bookings and resulted in a loss of \$10,262. Some practices of inflated travel claims and forged receipts were noted. The studies demonstrated oversight increase and vulnerability in financial misuse.

### Liquidity constraints and funding limitations

Liquidity constraints in Zimbabwe universities contributes to travel claim challenges besides governance and fraud. According to the article by Chikwature and Makamache (2020), limited travelling and subsistence allowances disrupt operations and prevent departments from achieving their targets. The study by Mazorodze and Mkhize (2024) indicates that 46% of academic staff failed to get research funding preventing them attending research conferences. This also indicates that travel claim management is affected by funding and hinders institutional performance.

### Claim travel management and automation

Some studies highlight inefficiencies in manual travel management systems and suggest automation and digital transformation as a solution. Carter et al. (2008) recommended that electronic transformation of travel claim enables reimbursement within 24 hours. Makwari (2018) confirms that automation prevents signature forgery and enhances staff motivation. According to Satheesh (2025) automation provides real time and budget tracking process on travel claim management. Khand (2020) similarly confirms that automation reduces paperwork and improves financial data integration although usability challenges remained. Collectively these studies agree that automation system strengthens accuracy, efficiency, and transparency.

**Strategic Travel Management, Policy reform, and standardization**

Universities have resorted to policies and regulations regarding travel claim management. The University of Edinburgh (2024) introduced limits on accommodation and encourage Travel management companies to facilitate students and staff traveling trips. Atlantic Technological University (2025) initiated that travel expense claims should be submitted within one to three months and travelers to share transport where possible for control purposes. These initiatives are being taken to improve efficiency in travel management systems.

**Summary of the Synthesis**

The overall synthesis of the selected studies reveals a move from fragmented manual and compliance fragile travel systems to policy driven automated travel management systems. It has also been revealed that continuous governance weaknesses, fraud exposure and liquidity challenges undermine institutional efficiency. It has been discovered that critical issues to assist universities in improving accountability include automation, stronger internal controls, clear policies, and real-time budget tracking.

**Studies included in the systematic literature review (21)**

**Table 1.**

No	Author(s) & year	Article title	Findings
1	Carter et al. (2008)	Electronic travel claim pays Claim rewards: How university of Arkansas’ electronic travel claim pays for everyone.	The findings confirm that automation travel claim system identifies and corrects mistakes at the point of data capturing. It reduces processing time to one or two days
2	Makwari (2018)	ZESA Expenses Reimbursement Centre	Institutions suffer long reimbursement cycle, missing documents, signature forgery, exaggerated trips due to manual systems.
3	Memorial University (2025)	Technology to modernize travel claim management process	Manual claim system results in missing documents and delays in reimbursement
4	Wang (2025)	University travel reimbursement problems and travel platforms, application, Exploration	Findings confirm that manual reimbursement is time consuming, gives work lord to auditors. Manual systems promote lack of transparency and implementation of automation was recommended.
5	Maganga & Vutete (2015)	Corporate governance performance of Zimbabwean state universities as a quality of Higher Education.	The study confirms that universities that adhere to available policies and travel regulations face less challenges.
6	Zimbabwe Auditor General (2021/2022/2023)	Annual Reports for Auditor General of Zimbabwe	Employees not acquitting traveling and subsistence, missing documents, noncompliance with travel policy resulting in universities monetary loss and accumulated date not accounted for.
7	ACFE (2024)	Occupational fraud 2024-A report to the nations	The findings stated that 17% of fraud cases in education institutions are linked to reimbursement claims and the results indicated a median loss of \$50,000
8	Wertz /Office of Auditing (2020)	University of Texas, University travel Audit Report (UTEP)	Findings stated that 38% of travelers used unauthorized sources for travel bookings, provided insufficient documentation of the expenses incurred

9	Chikwature & Makamache (2020)	Cash management systems in Higher Education Institutions-A new form of corporate responsibility at Mutare Polytechnic in Zimbabwe	The findings state that rigid systems and bureaucracy in Zimbabwe institutions retards progress. Accurate cash flow forecast assists in attaining set targets.
10	Mazorodze & Mkhize (2024)	Exploring barriers to Innovation in Higher education	Institutions of higher learning lack policies that support funding for international conferences and attendances.
11	Satheesh (2025)	Traveling and expense management for universities: Why automation matters	Travel claim automation provides real time and budget tracking. It reduces errors and administration fatigue.
12	Khand (2020)	Impact of EPR in Higher Education Institutions	Transmission of manuals to automation travel claim reduces paperwork. It improves the integration of students and staff data for claim compliance.
13	University of Edinburgh (2024)	Sustainable Travel Policy	The findings state that use of a Travel Management Company is crucial for monitoring and accountability of trips by university staff.
14	Atlantic Tech University (2025)	Traveling and subsistence policy	Approvers of travel claim should check for completeness before authorization of payment. Staff members encouraged to share transport where possible to cut cost.
15	SAP Concur (2025,2026)	2026 Business travel expenses and trends.	The findings stated the need for universities to boost their travel claim management through automation systems to improve effectiveness on reimbursement.
16	Nkamleu & Kamgnia (2024)	Uses and abuse of per diems in Africa, a political economy of travel allowances.	Findings confirm that some travel per diem were used as salary supplement. This intensified misappropriation of travel funds. University staff became after monetary gain than actual work.
17	HCC Internal Audit (2024)	Understanding and preventing fraud in Higher Education	Administration staff misuse faculty resources for personal gain. There is alteration of travel claim receipts of trip that never occurred
18	Corporate Travel Management (TMC,2026)	Booking and managing travel through independent siloed platforms	Automation manages everything from travel claim forms to reconciliation. It makes the process efficient and targets attainable.
19	Marondera State University (2019)	Requiring travel advance to be accounted for within 30 days of return	The findings confirm the standardization of travel claim rates and enforcement of compliance.
20	Abbas K. (2026)	Management accounting and artificial intelligence: A comprehensive literature review	The findings state that systems automation potentially shapes accounting controls
21	Nelson J.D et al, (2023)	A comparative analysis of University Sustainable Travel Plans-Experience from Australia	Manual travel systems lack robust monitoring, reporting processes and adequately fail in solving challenges

## DISCUSSION

The systematic review of the selected articles demonstrates that travel claim management in higher education is critical for governance and operations. The empirical evidence reveals that institutions operating on manual travel management systems have prolonged cycle for reimbursement and high rejection rates (Makwari, 2018). In addition, manual systems experience weak compliance enforcement and reimbursement fraud. Carter et al. (2008) revealed 80% rate of rejected claim forms and month-long payment delays. The Auditor General of

Zimbabwe's report (2022,2023) indicated incomplete documentation and inefficiencies in travel management systems.

Inefficiencies have mostly been caused by governance weaknesses and noncompliance of the travel policies and regulations set by the institutions. According to Maganga & Vutete (2015) there has been unacquitted advances exceeding stipulated timelines and widespread practice of undocumented expenditures signifying fragile internal control systems. High staff turnover affects institutional memory and continuity as registered in the finance department where proper financial procedures were not followed. The findings suggest that effective enforcement, internal control, and capacity development are essential.

Expense reimbursement has a substantial proportion of fraud within the educational sector as presented by evidence from internal audits and global studies. Opportunities for inflated claims, forged receipts and undocumented travel bookings are because of decentralized institutional structures characterized by inconsistency and lack of verification.

Cash flow challenges and funding limitation have affected timely travel allowances and disrupted departmental workflows. Universities rely on government grants and research grants for operations. Weaknesses in travel claim management have a bearing on financial accountability and institutional competitiveness in academic excellence.

Evidence provided by the systematic literature review continuously confirmed automation and policy modernization of travel claim management system as a transformative solution. It has also been confirmed that electronic validation, real time budget tracking, reduced errors, and compliance are strengthened by automation claim management system.

The discussion overall presents a shift from a manual disconnected and reactive system to coordinated, technologically based approaches that comply with the policy goals. Effective travel management now depends on well governance, digital systems, and financial management working together.

### **Recommendations for Improving travel claim Management**

There are several improvements that can be implemented to strengthen travel claim management in Zimbabwean public universities. Based on this review, the first thing should be the transition of the institutions from manual to fully automated travel claims systems. This is because the review stipulates that “manual systems promote reimbursement delays and audit trail challenges.” Automation would reduce errors, enhance transparency and shorten processing cycles. The second thing is that universities should tighten compliance mechanisms by enforcing timely acquittals and strengthening internal controls. This is as revealed by the Auditor-General's report that “unacquitted travel advances of more than 180 days.” Thirdly, policy frameworks should be standardized across institutions to reduce inconsistencies and bureaucratic delays. Capacity -building initiatives for finance staff would also improve accuracy and reduce fraud risk. Finally, universities should explore integrated digital platforms that support real-time monitoring, budget tracking, audit readiness and aligning with global best practices highlighted in the review.

### **CONCLUSION**

The qualitative synthesis of this systematic review reveals that travel claim management in universities is a multidimensional issue. It encompasses administrative efficiency, financial management, fraud prevention, cashflow management and policy compliance. The study demonstrates that manual claim management faces continuous challenges including delays, misplacement and loss of documentation, financial misconduct, and weak regulation enforcement. Institutions that implement automation systems enforce constant policies, experience real-time financial controls, efficiency, transparency, and improved compliance. Automation accelerates reimbursement processes and improved internal controls that prevent fraud opportunities. Automation comes along with sustainability that encompasses strategic role of travel governance.

The emerging trend built from the synthesized findings is the transition from manual reimbursement systems to automated systems that enable real time expense validation. Audit evidence from Zimbabwe has directed scholarly attention to compliance failures and internal control weaknesses. International empirical evidence suggest that automation enhances transparency and fraud detection, but Zimbabwean evidence reveal that local universities rely on manual systems indicating a digital governance gap. Gaps identified were lack of empirical research on travel claim management in Zimbabwe and insufficient assessment of Zimbabwean institutions' readiness to automation.

This study is subject to certain limitations. The study exclusively used Google Scholar database; despite its comprehensiveness it may have excluded relevant studies from other databases. There are a limited empirical evidence and studies about travel claim management in Zimbabwe. Additionally, only English language articles were included omitting relevant non-English articles. The use of peer review journal articles and reports only may have overlooked valuable insights from conference proceedings and gray literature.

Future research should address these limitations by incorporating multiple databases. Comparative studies across African universities, Cost benefit analysis of digital travel systems and effectiveness of new travel policies on post automation in universities.

In conclusion, effective claim travel management system in higher education requires an integrated approach that combines clear policy compliance, financial support, strong governance, and technological advancement. Institutions that adopt such integrated approach frameworks are better positioned to improve operational performance, support academic excellence and good management of resources.

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