



Examining Quality Assurance Challenges in Two Private Higher Education Institutions in Zimbabwe: Implications to Institutional Good Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study examined quality assurance challenges faced in two private universities in Harare. The study was motivated by the expansion of private universities in offering access to higher education. There is need to ensure that there is consistent academic quality education which fit purpose. An interpretive paradigm was employed while a mixed-method research approach was used, which necessitated the use of both quantitative surveys from students with qualitative data coming from academic staff and institution administrators. Findings revealed that while private institutions established internal quality assurance structures, they still face major challenges which include: financial limitations, shortage of qualified staff, weak ICT infrastructure, inconsistent policies which affected the implementation processes. There is therefore, need for a stronger institutional commitment from stakeholders, to fund the necessary investments in quality assurance. Recommendations include the need for closer collaborations with quality regulatory bodies for the sustenance of academic quality assurance processes in these private higher education institutions. Furthermore, there is need to strengthen internal Quality Assurance mechanisms in these private institutions, to enhance staff development programmes, and to have a fair improvement of resource allocations. Finally, there is need to foster partnerships between the government and the business communities for continuous quality assurance improvement.

Keywords: Quality Assurance; Private Higher Education; Total Quality Management; Infrastructure; Resource Constraints; Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE)

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance in higher education has become a global issue in both public and private institutions. This is driven by the continued need to ensure that the education provided is fit for purpose and it meets the desired global higher education standards. The international goal of higher education is to ensure that graduates from the institutions of higher learning possess the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to succeed in the ever increasing complex, and interconnected world of work [22]. For that reason, therefore, institutions of higher learning are expected to offer quality higher education, which is anchored by research. The purpose of Quality assurance is to satisfy both explicit or implicit needs, in higher education. Issues to be satisfied include: ensuring that there is qualified academic staff, ethical and competent leadership, curricula creation which hinges on critical thinking, research, innovation and industrialisation with a justifiable inclusive practice [45]. Although these are the issues that are engrossed in the aims of higher education, it is common that some critical issues are not found in the practices of higher educational institutions. The absence therefore, has to be scrutinised through their adherence to quality assurance mechanism and the governance system, employed to meet quality education ethos.

Quality education is central to the 2030 Agenda, with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) calling for inclusive, equitable and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. In higher education, this includes expanding access while ensuring that learners acquire relevant knowledge, skills and competencies for employment, entrepreneurship and sustainable development ([31], [26]). Quality education also contributes to

broader socioeconomic outcomes, including poverty reduction, equity, peace and social integration [33]. Achieving these outcomes requires effective quality assurance systems that monitor educational provision, identify disparities and promote continuous improvement.

SDG 4 is closely interconnected with SDG 16, which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.[31]. This relationship highlights the responsibility of higher education institutions to provide equitable access, allocate resources fairly and maintain safe and supportive learning environments. Consequently, effective quality assurance is essential for ensuring that higher education institutions contribute meaningfully to the equity, inclusion, accountability and sustainable development objectives underpinning the SDGs [40].

Globally, higher education quality assurance is guided by international standards and frameworks that promote consistent academic quality and institutional accountability. The International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ISG) provides an inclusive framework developed through the collective expertise of international quality assurance agencies and professionals ([23]). Similarly, the International Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ICAQAHE) supports the advancement of institutional quality standards through accreditation. At the national level, these international quality principles complement the regulatory mandate of bodies such as the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE), supporting alignment between institutional practices and recognised higher education standards. Collectively, these frameworks emphasise academic excellence, accountability and continuous quality improvement within higher education institutions.

Under the ZIMCHE Act [Chapter 25:27], the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) serves as the primary regulatory authority mandated to evaluate, accredit, and audit higher education institutions (HEIs), ensuring compliance with national standards regarding governance, staffing, infrastructure, and academic programs ([44]; [39]). Central to this regulatory framework is a strict two-stage provisional registration process, along with mandatory external institutional audits and program re-accreditations every five years ([44];[19]). Effective auditing is crucial for driving institutional governance, maintaining academic standards, and safeguarding qualification credibility ([22]; [17]). In Zimbabwe, however, systemic constraints such as inadequate resources, weak stakeholder engagement, and poor compliance with audit recommendations, frequently undermine these quality assurance mechanisms, risking compromised educational outcomes and regulatory failure ([34];[22]).

Statement of the Problem

Private universities in Zimbabwe encounter a myriad of problems which include inadequate infrastructure, shortage of teaching staff, inadequate teaching and learning resources such as science laboratories, computer laboratories and gadgets. The above shortages have seriously impacted on quality assurance practices to an extent that some programmes have been closed and some institutions' license withdrawn. This is regardless that ZIMCHE insists on setting quality assurance mechanisms to monitor and audit these institutions ensuring that they keep abreast of international quality assurance standards. Thus, this study was conducted to trace the challenges in two institutions, so that once identified they could inform private institutions to offer the best practices which stand the demands of both ZIMCHE and ICAQAHE.

Research Question

The study was guided with the following research question.

1. What major challenges do private universities in Zimbabwe face which impact quality assurance?
2. Which mechanisms do private universities employ to monitor quality assurance issues?
3. How do private universities deal with challenges which affect quality assurance?



Significance of study

There is a notable void in the literature regarding the quality assurance practices of private institutions of higher learning. The dearth of literature is even more pronounced when it comes to the private institutions of higher learning, especially in Zimbabwe, which has seen the mushrooming of private institutions of higher learning in the past three decades. It is crucial to examine the quality assurance practices in private institutions of higher learning given the socioeconomic and cultural factors that present unique challenges for them. The issues of corruption, nepotism, transparency, professionalism and accountability have eroded the concept 'fit for purpose' which is associated with the culture of quality assurance. Thus, this study will provide useful literature on what should be done to navigate the challenges mostly encountered in private institutions of higher learning which can derail best practices of quality assurance. The study will equip not only management and lecturers with the tools and knowledge to navigate their way in the face of socio-economic, shortages of resources as challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges faced in private institutions of higher education

Despite significantly expanding access to higher education, the rapid growth of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) has raised serious concerns regarding teaching, learning, and research quality ([45];[5]). Relying predominantly on tuition fees for revenue, many PHEIs prioritise enrolment expansion for institutional survival, leading to rapid growth that outpaces investments in academic staff, infrastructure, libraries, laboratories, ICTs, and student support services ([20]; [28];[3]; [2];[6] [28]). This imbalance creates overcrowded classrooms, high student-lecturer ratios, and difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified staff due to limited remuneration and job insecurity ([36]). Consequently, inadequate funding and overstretched capacities severely constrain quality assurance (QA) systems, threatening academic integrity and institutional reputation ([6]). These systemic strains have manifested in program closures and the revocation of institutional charters in Zimbabwe, as well as similar resource pressures in Uganda, while the swift evolution toward digital and blended learning has further exposed critical gaps in infrastructure and pedagogical capacity that hinder effective contributions to national development ([19]; [17]; [25]; [36]).

Mechanisms private universities monitor quality assurance

Quality assurance mechanisms such as programme accreditation, curriculum reviews, external audits, and staff appraisals are indispensable for maintaining and improving educational standards in higher education ([45]). Institutions establish quality assurance directorates to set institutional goals, regulate audits, and oversee overall educational quality ([4]). In developing nations, these internal policies and external review systems are increasingly utilised to meet international expectations ([26]), guided by frameworks like the European Standards and Guidelines. Regionally, the Association of African Universities serves as an apex forum for consultation and cooperation, while nationally in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) mandates adherence to quality standards across institutional governance, infrastructure, research, and student support.

Ways private universities deal with challenges to effect quality assurance

Private universities demonstrate that although structural challenges such as funding deficits and brain drain cannot be entirely eradicated, their adverse effects can be mitigated through integrated internal and external quality assurance mechanisms. Dedicated internal quality assurance (IQA) units, regular programme reviews, staff development, digital integration, evidence-based management, and alignment with the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) enable institutions to move beyond compliance towards continuous improvement, innovation, and institutional excellence. This aligns with [27], who argues that effective IQA systems strengthen institutional quality through continuous evaluation when supported by management commitment, adequate funding, and a robust quality culture. Concurrently, external regulatory compliance provides an important accountability framework through institutional audits, curriculum reviews, and programme accreditation, ensuring academic and legal legitimacy. As [10] contend, sustainable quality assurance depends on the synergistic integration of internal systems, external regulation, institutional



accountability, and continuous enhancement, while collaborative audits further promote organisational learning, transparency, and accountability.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Total Quality Management (TQM) framework pioneered by Deming (1986), which emphasises continuous improvement, stakeholder participation, customer satisfaction, process management, employee involvement, and evidence-based decision-making. In higher education, TQM views students, employers, and society as key stakeholders whose needs should guide institutional processes and outcomes ([21];[33]). The framework further promotes institution-wide responsibility for quality, where leadership commitment, staff involvement, continuous feedback, systematic monitoring, and process improvement contribute to institutional effectiveness [1]. TQM therefore provides a relevant lens for examining quality assurance challenges in private higher education institutions by highlighting how a collective quality culture and continuous improvement can enhance teaching, administrative efficiency, service delivery, and overall institutional performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was located in the interpretive research philosophy which emphasises the use of multiple methods to understand complex social phenomena ([16]) The pragmatic worldview is flexible and practical in finding viable solutions to the phenomena under inquiry. Quality assurance issues involves both measurable indicators and subjective perceptions therefore this philosophy aligns well with the study's objectives. Two private higher education institutions in Harare were selected.

Research Approach

This study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques to comprehensively examine quality assurance challenges in private higher education institutions ([35]). This approach effectively captured both measurable institutional indicators and the contextual factors shaping stakeholder experiences. Quantitative data from students and academic staff identified trends in quality assurance practices, while qualitative interviews with key informants provided deeper insights into institutional dynamics. The integration of these datasets generated a holistic understanding of the research problem, while triangulation enhanced credibility, minimized bias, increased reliability, and allowed for a richer interpretation of findings ([11]; [35]; [12]).

Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed concurrently before being integrated during interpretation. The datasets were analysed independently and then merged to compare, corroborate, and complement findings, with equal emphasis placed on both forms of evidence. This design facilitated a comprehensive examination of quality assurance challenges from multiple stakeholder perspectives through the triangulation of questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. By integrating quantitative patterns with qualitative insights, the approach enhanced the credibility, depth, and completeness of the findings ([14]; [35]).

Population, Sample, and Sampling Procedure

Target Population

The target population comprised individuals possessing specific characteristics of interest to the researcher ([41]). For this study, it spanned a multi-stakeholder community across two private higher education institutions in Harare, incorporating administrative staff from quality assurance, registry, and examinations; academic lecturers and program coordinators; senior management such as registrars, deans, principals, and heads of departments; and both undergraduate and postgraduate students. This multi-layered population was methodologically vital due to the multidimensional nature of quality assurance, enabling a comprehensively



triangulated evaluation derived from learners, implementers, administrative actors, and institutional decision-makers.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

To overcome the logistical and financial impracticality of investigating an entire population, the study utilised a mixed-methods sampling approach combining probability and non-probability techniques ([12]; [32]; [35]). A total sample of 115 participants was drawn, comprising 100 respondents for the quantitative survey, selected through simple random sampling among students, academic staff, and administrative personnel to minimise bias and enhance generalisability. 15 key informants were selected for qualitative semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was specifically employed to select senior management and quality assurance personnel with specialized knowledge, yielding rich contextual insights that complemented the quantitative data ([12]). This strategic integration of random and purposive sampling successfully balanced statistical representativeness with in-depth qualitative evidence, thereby strengthening the credibility, validity, and overall trustworthiness of the findings.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using three complementary instruments: semi-structured questionnaires, key informant interview schedules, and document analysis guides. The use of multiple data collection methods facilitated methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility, dependability, and comprehensiveness of the study findings ([15]).

Semi-Structured Questionnaires

Validated semi-structured questionnaires were administered to students and academic staff to collect primary data on quality assurance practices in higher education institutions. The questionnaires consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions generated quantitative data suitable for statistical analysis, while open-ended questions enabled respondents to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions, thereby providing richer contextual information. The combination of question formats enhances the breadth and depth of data collected and improves the overall quality of survey research ([11]). The questionnaires were self-administered through online platforms, improving accessibility, reducing administration time, and increasing response efficiency while allowing respondents adequate time to provide thoughtful responses ([30]).

Key Informant Interview Schedules

Semi-structured interview schedules were used to collect in-depth qualitative data from key stakeholders responsible for quality assurance within the participating institutions. Participants included Registrars, Deans, Principals, and Quality Assurance personnel. Semi-structured interviews provide sufficient flexibility to explore predetermined themes while allowing researchers to probe emerging issues and obtain detailed explanations from participants. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and institutional practices ([38];[18]). The flexibility inherent in semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to capture nuanced insights into quality assurance processes that may not have emerged through structured interviews alone.

Document Analysis Guide

Document analysis complemented the questionnaire and interview data by providing contextual and institutional evidence relating to quality assurance practices. Documents reviewed included institutional quality assurance policies, accreditation reports, strategic plans, annual reports, programme review reports, institutional statutes, and other official records. The systematic review of these documents enabled verification of participant responses, identification of institutional quality assurance frameworks, and a deeper understanding of organisational practices. Document analysis is recognised as a valuable qualitative research technique because it provides historical, contextual, and administrative evidence that strengthens the credibility of research findings



([41];[18]). In this study, documentary evidence enhanced methodological triangulation by corroborating findings from questionnaires and interviews, thereby improving the trustworthiness and validity of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and institutional permission were obtained before data collection, including written authorization from the participating institutions and an introductory letter from the researcher's university. The study adhered to established ethical principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, non-maleficence, and research integrity ([42];[15]). Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights, including the freedom to decline participation, withdraw at any stage, or omit questions without penalty ([42]). Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of codes and pseudonyms, secure data storage, restricted access, and the exclusion of personally identifiable information from reports and publications. The study also minimised potential physical, psychological, social, and professional risks and upheld scientific integrity through accurate data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting, while avoiding fabrication, falsification, selective reporting, and plagiarism ([11]).

Data Presentation and Analysis

In this study data analysis started from editing and checking of gathered raw data for accuracy, usefulness, and completeness. Coding then followed and it involved the collaboration of findings from the questionnaires and key informant interviews. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences software was then used to analyse the data using a number of variables. Data from the field was fed into the excel work sheets and analysed by the use of descriptive statistics. The analysed data comprise both qualitative and quantitative features. Quantitative data was presented in tables whilst the qualitative data was in narrative form to support the quantitative data. Open-ended responses were grouped and coded. Content analysis was applied to qualitative data collected from key informants.

RESULTS, FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The empirical data indicates a divergence between institutional intent and operational capability. Despite the presence of functional quality directorates and policies, severe resource dependencies cripple day to day academic delivery. A comprehensive analysis of the survey responses identifies a myriad of co-occurring constraints. The data will be presented in the form of tables for the quantitative data and these will be augmented by qualitative data from the key informant interviews and document analysis. Data will be analysed by linking the findings to the theoretical framework and previous studies based on literature. Pearson's chi-square test of independence was also used for categorical comparisons, with Cramer's V reported as an effect-size measure.

Table 1: Primary Quality Assurance Challenges Matrix

Quality Assurance Challenge	College (Count)	University (Count)	Aggregate Impact (%)
Inadequate Funding	27	36	56.7%
Lack of Modern ICT Systems	26	37	56.7%
Inadequate Infrastructure	25	36	54.9%
Limited Training & Capacity Building	26	31	51.3%
Shortage of Qualified Personnel	21	25	41.4%
Resistance to Change	11	19	27.0%
Weak Monitoring & Evaluation	5	27	28.8%



Pressure to Increase Enrolment	21	19	27.0%
Government and Regulatory Policies	12	17	29.0%

From the above table, it shows that there are a myriad of challenges affecting quality assurance challenges at both the college and university. These include inadequate funding which stood at (56,7%). The study also noted there was shortage of qualified personnel which was (41,4%). The figure also indicates private institutions of higher education offered a limited training and capacity building which as indicated was (51,3%). Furthermore, the lack of modern ICT laboratories was noted at (56,7%). Further to that, the study noted there was inadequate infrastructure which was reported by (54,9%). In addition to that, the study noted that there was a report of situations of people who were resistant to change (27%). Other issues reported included weak monitoring and evaluation systems in institutions (28,8%), and the ever-increasing pressure for institutions to increase enrolments (27%). Finally, participants indicated that there was pressure to comply to regulatory policies (29%). This was further augmented by data from key informants through the interviews, and document analysis which was made by the researchers.

The cross-tabulation shows that most major challenges were reported at broadly similar rates across the two institution types. These differences were small and not statistically significant ($p > .05$), suggesting that these constraints are common to both institutional types rather than being uniquely associated with either a college or a university. Similar patterns were observed for ICT limitations, training and capacity building, shortage of qualified personnel, resistance to change, enrolment pressure and regulatory pressures. The clearest institutional difference concerns weak monitoring and evaluation. Only 10.0% of college respondents reported weak monitoring and evaluation compared with 41.5% of university respondents. The association was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (1) = 14.00$, $p < .001$, with a moderate effect (Cramer's $V = .349$). This indicates that weak monitoring and evaluation was disproportionately reported in the university sample. Consequently, this may reflect differences in the complexity of university-level quality processes, reporting requirements or the maturity of internal monitoring systems.

Financial Constraints and Quality Assurance

The study identified inadequate funding as the most significant challenge affecting quality assurance implementation. 56,7% identified financial limitations as a major barrier to achieving institutional quality objectives. Interview findings further revealed that both institutions rely heavily on tuition fees as their primary source of revenue. One key informant argued that; *'there are budget limitations as the institution largely rely on fees to run operations as it does not receive government support as compared to public institutions. Late payments by students affects the institutional operations as it largely depends on student fees.* A student also stated that fees are increasing every semester causing students to defer or completely drop out of the programmes. *"Financial pressures also contribute to increased tuition fees, which discourage student enrolment and increase deferments, thereby reducing institutional income and creating a cycle of financial instability."* Respondent R further states that, *"insufficient funding adversely affect critical components of institutional quality, including the recruitment and retention of qualified academic staff, infrastructure development, investment in information and communication technologies, research productivity, student support services such as counselling, health services, accommodation support and creation of conducive learning environment"*. In addition, Respondent Q stated: *"Our biggest challenge is financial sustainability. Most resources are directed towards operational expenses and regulatory compliance, leaving limited resources for innovation and quality improvement."*

The findings reinforce the TQM principle that sustained quality improvement depends on committed leadership and adequate investment in financial, human and technological resources. Persistent resource constraints therefore limit institutions' ability to strengthen teaching, learning, research and support services. This is consistent with evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, where inadequate funding has been associated with limited staff development, weak infrastructure and constrained student support ([28];[3]);[29] similarly found that rapid enrolment growth without corresponding financial investment has placed considerable pressure on quality assurance in Ugandan universities. In Zimbabwe, financial constraints have restricted private higher education institutions' capacity to secure essential human and material resources ([20]), while fiscal limitations have



contributed to infrastructure deterioration, outdated curricula and reduced research capacity ([2]). In addition, inadequate investment in digital technologies and staff development continues to impede quality assurance ([46]), while limited government funding and research grants constrain institutional development, innovation and infrastructure expansion ([28]).

Human Resource Capacity and Staff Retention

Table 2: Does the institution have sufficient qualified staff?

Variable	Respondents College	Respondents University
Disagree	25	42
Agree	5	9
Neutral	7	4
Strongly Agree	3	5

The study found significant challenges related to recruitment and retention of qualified personnel. Many respondents indicated that their departments lacked adequate numbers of qualified academic staff. Institutional documents also highlighted difficulties associated with staff retention. Several interviewees attributed staff turnover to issues such as low remuneration, economic instability, better opportunities abroad, limited career progression pathways. The challenge of staff retention has serious implications for educational quality because experienced lecturers contribute significantly to curriculum development, student mentorship, research productivity, and institutional leadership. A Dean observed: *“Many highly qualified lecturers leave after gaining experience because institutions cannot match salaries offered elsewhere.”* Another academic respondent highlighted the following; *‘Lack of cooperation by employer and authorities in terms of recognizing learned professionals. Doctors and Professors are paid like general O level educated staff. This leads to demotivation and staff exodus. Corruption and nepotism also affect employment of qualified staff and production of quality results.’*

The findings corroborate previous literature highlighting the unavailability of qualified staff and the critical impact of brain drain on African higher education ([36]; [8]). Within Zimbabwe, hyperinflation, plummeting salaries, and deteriorating working conditions have driven academics, researchers, and quality assurance professionals to migrate abroad, resulting in increased workloads, delayed quality assurance activities, and diminished institutional capacity ([46];[45]). This exodus, coupled with pervasive staff demotivation and high turnover, undermines institutional governance, research capacity, and the sustained implementation of quality standards ([24];[31]). Viewed through a Total Quality Management (TQM) perspective, these staffing shortages are not isolated human resource issues but systemic barriers rooted in institutional constraints like inadequate remuneration and misaligned policies. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic, systems-oriented approach rather than isolated recruitment efforts to restore continuous improvement cycles and strengthen collaborative quality cultures.

Infrastructure and Quality Assurance

Table 3 : Infrastructure and Quality Assurance

Variable	Respondents College	Respondents University
Very Adequate	2	2
Adequate	3	4
Neutral	3	4



Inadequate	15	20
Very Inadequate	17	30

The table above indicates that lack of sufficient infrastructure emerged as another major obstacle to quality assurance. Respondents identified deficiencies in: lecture rooms, administrative offices, student accommodation, laboratories, libraries and recreational facilities. The majority of participants rated available infrastructure as inadequate for current enrolment levels. Document analysis revealed that both institutions had infrastructure expansion plans aimed at addressing space shortages and improving learning environments. The findings suggest that inadequate infrastructure negatively affects issues such as student learning experiences, staff productivity, programme accreditation and institutional reputation. Quality education requires proper infrastructure, which embrace all the above. As one student P1 points out that, *there is shortage of learning facilities and ICT infrastructure and is not for the best to always clash for rooms to conduct a lecture in*. One Dean of students highlighted *that lack of adequate infrastructure affects administration, inclusive teaching and learning thus negatively affecting student performance*. Inadequate infrastructure and limited resources create significant barriers to effective learning and development ([43]).

[3] observe that chronic underinvestment in academic infrastructure, including inadequate lecture rooms, library resources, internet connectivity and power supply, negatively affects teaching and learning outcomes. In Zimbabwe, the erosion of standards in teaching, research and institutional governance further contributes to persistent quality challenges ([9];[8]). From a TQM perspective, infrastructure should therefore be regarded as a strategic investment essential for continuous quality improvement rather than merely a physical resource. Adequate infrastructure supports effective curriculum delivery, collaborative learning, research productivity and digital integration, while its inadequacy can result in overcrowding, obsolete equipment, restricted access to e-learning resources and insufficient academic and student support services ([4]).

Table 4: Availability of Research Facilities

Variable	Respondents College	Respondents University
Very Adequate	2	3
Adequate	6	10
Neutral	2	4
Inadequate	20	20
Very Inadequate	10	23

The findings indicate that insufficient research services, particularly limited hardcopy materials, internet connectivity and access to electronic resources, were prominent challenges in both institutions. Respondent 5 observed that *“limited access to up to date academic materials negatively affects teaching quality, student research and programme accreditation,”* while inadequate subscriptions, ICT infrastructure and library automation further restricted access to scholarly databases and digital resources. The respondent 6 similarly identified limited financial capacity for computers, internet connectivity and maintenance as barriers to quality education services. From a TQM perspective, these limitations constrain continuous improvement, employee empowerment and customer focus by restricting institutions’ capacity to generate, access and apply knowledge effectively, thereby compromising educational quality and stakeholder expectations.

Growing Student Population and Quality Assurance

The findings indicate that rapid enrolment growth places considerable pressure on quality assurance systems in private higher education institutions, with 27% of respondents noting that expanding numbers “often outpace the availability of academic staff, classrooms, laboratories, library resources and student support services thereby



compromising compliance with established quality standards" ([39]). This massification, unbacked by commensurate investment in institutional capacity, undermines quality assurance effectiveness ([45]). Highlighting similar regional trends, a study in Uganda by [29] revealed that "ten times the usual number of students were admitted, with only a small percentage being government-sponsored" ([25]), raising serious concerns about how diminished teaching and learning conditions hinder overall service delivery.

Table 5: Perceived Value of Staff Training and Development in Strengthening Quality Assurance

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	3.6	3.6	3.6
	Neutral	3	5.5	5.5	9.1
	Agree	25	45.5	45.5	54.5
	Strongly Agree	25	45.5	45.5	45.5
	Total	55	100.0	100.0	

The findings reveal that the majority of respondents agree that staff training and development is of great value in quality education. This is in line with TQM which emphasises continuous learning and capacity building as prerequisites for sustainable quality improvement ([39]). The departure of experienced academics and quality assurance practitioners deprives institutions of mentorship opportunities, institutional knowledge, and technical expertise required to train new staff and strengthen quality systems. Consequently, universities become increasingly dependent on a limited number of personnel, leading to work overload, reduced innovation, lower staff morale, and diminished effectiveness of internal quality assurance mechanisms ([45]). These outcomes contradict TQM's central philosophy that organisational excellence depends upon continuous investment in people and the development of a culture where every employee contributes to quality enhancement.

Overall, the cross-tabulations indicate that the quality assurance challenges are predominantly systemic across the two private institutions rather than sharply differentiated by institutional type. Funding, ICT, infrastructure, staff capacity and training appear to affect both settings at comparable levels. Weak monitoring and evaluation are the notable exception and warrants targeted investigation because university respondents reported it at more than four times the rate observed in the college. From a Total Quality Management perspective, this pattern suggests that continuous improvement should be institutionalised across both settings, while monitoring, evidence-based decision-making and feedback systems may require particular strengthening at university level [1, 21].

The Good Practices Observed

Despite the quality assurance challenges noted, there were also some institutional good practices which were observed during the study and these are clearly outlined below;

Infrastructural Development

100% of the respondents concurred that infrastructure is key in achieving quality in higher education. These include physical infrastructure such as learning spaces, offices, ablution facilities, inclusive buildings, clinics and ICT infrastructure to enable communication and real time assessments and feedback. For instance, on document analysis, a new learning block is being constructed at the University under study to cater for the growing number of students on the Harare Main Campus to ease the pressing demand for teaching and administration space. This include staff offices which will be furnished accordingly to provide suitable working space that boosts morale. The University also intends to start student accommodation services. The university launched the Blended Online Learning and Teaching Platform (BOLT), a learning management system designed



to reach students beyond its borders and those within Zimbabwe who may find it difficult to study through any of the conventional and traditional modes of learning /instruction.

Student and Staff Support

Student enrolment, retention, and graduation have remained successful over the years, supported by collaborative efforts between the Assistant Registrar for Student Affairs, the Student Representative Council, and various learning centres to ensure uniform service delivery and address student needs. Institutional commitment to holistic well-being is demonstrated through extra-curricular activities, comprehensive staff development and wellness programs, and staff committees that actively engage with the Registry and Human Resources departments. Furthermore, the university has fostered emotional resilience and personal growth through the launch of the Psycho-Spiritual Social Support Program (PSSSP), which integrates psychological counselling, spiritual guidance, and social support. To put students at the heart of the learning process and ensure a secure environment, the second institution has also implemented targeted internal frameworks, such as data protection and student induction policies, designed to safeguard confidentiality and support students throughout their academic journey.

University Re-accreditation, Associateship and Affiliation

The university actively engages in external quality assurance, having successfully met ZIMCHE accreditation requirements and secured a renewed license while implementing reviewer recommendations for continuous operational improvement. Such success relies on practitioners utilising sound quality planning to identify challenges and formulate informed strategies, as improved accreditation standards directly enhance graduate performance and overall higher education quality (Sumarni et al., 2024). Furthermore, the college maintains strategic associateships and affiliations with state universities in Zimbabwe via formal Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). These partnerships foster vital academic cooperation through collaborative research, joint marketing, publication and material exchanges, resource-sharing of libraries and online databases, and professional capacity-building initiatives.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined quality assurance challenges and institutional practices in two private higher education institutions in Harare, Zimbabwe. The findings demonstrate that while both institutions have made considerable efforts to establish quality assurance systems and maintain compliance with national regulatory requirements, several structural and operational challenges continue to constrain the effectiveness of these systems.

Conclusions

Based on the findings the following conclusions were drawn:

- Financial resources are central to effective quality assurance implementation. Without sustainable funding, private higher education institutions cannot maintain adequate infrastructure, research output or retain qualified staff which are all essential for quality education.
- Human capital development remains a critical challenge. Retaining and training qualified lecturers and administrators is essential for sustaining quality in teaching and learning.
- Institutional QA systems require strengthening. The lack of clear QA frameworks, documentation and internal audits reduces accountability and hinders continuous improvement.
- ICT and digital capacity are indispensable for modern quality assurance. The institutions need to integrate technology into teaching, assessment and quality monitoring processes to remain competitive.
- Collaborative regulatory frameworks promote better compliance. A supportive rather than punitive approach from ZIMCHE would encourage the institutions to embrace quality assurance as a developmental tool.



- Leadership commitment and staff buy-in are critical for the success of quality assurance. Building a sustainable culture of quality requires top-level commitment, participatory decision-making, and regular staff engagement.

Recommendations

- Being inclusive (ensures that all departments are included and understand quality assurance issues to ensure staff have a buy in and create a quality assurance culture within the institutions.
- Need to adopt the Total Quality Management model to ensure holistic quality assurance. It then leads to more student focused approaches, continuous improvement, employee involvement and fact-based decision making
- There is need for the integration of the student affairs into institutional quality assurance structures to ensure holistic and student-centered approaches which leads to improved service delivery.
- Need for strengthened student support and feedback /response to complaints(protection) mechanisms. Student centered approaches are needed to improve the quality processes.
- There is need to prioritise infrastructure development linked to teaching and learning such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories, ICT infrastructure, student accommodation, clinics and offices.
- Need to continuously seek partnerships for financial and resource support. Partnerships and benchmarking help institutions identify gaps and weaknesses, promotes adoption of best practices in teaching, learning, student support and governance.
- Need for continuous capacity building of both academic and non-academic staff.
- Dedicated budgets for staff training, infrastructure, ICT and student support services.
- Need for formal structures to enhance systematic monitoring, continuous improvement and accountability.
- There is need for regulatory bodies to offer tailored capacity building programmes for private higher education institutions and facilitate benchmarking networks.
- There is need for dedicated quality assurance directorate for systematic monitoring and student-centered quality assurance for feedbacks, tracer studies and grievance mechanisms.

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