

Compliance in Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Public and Private Universities in Zambia

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Abstract:

Compliance with national quality assurance (QA) regulations is critical for institutional credibility and academic excellence, yet it remains a significant challenge in many higher education systems. This study investigates the levels, drivers, and barriers of QA compliance within Zambia's rapidly expanding tertiary sector, focusing on a comparative analysis of two public and two private universities. Employing a mixed-methods approach, including semi-structured interviews with 12 QA officers, document analysis of audit reports, and compliance audits using the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) Learning Programme Audit Tool, the research reveals fragmented and uneven compliance. Public universities are primarily constrained by bureaucratic inertia, systemic underfunding, and staffing shortages. Private universities face challenges related to financial sustainability, transparency, and capacity-building. The findings indicate that compliance is often symbolic, driven by coercive pressure for accreditation rather than internalized quality enhancement. The study concludes that a harmonized QA culture, which balances regulatory enforcement with institutional autonomy and support, is essential. It recommends strengthening autonomous institutional QA units, implementing targeted capacity development, aligning funding with compliance incentives, and fostering collaborative dialogue between regulators and universities. This research contributes to policy discourse aimed at elevating educational quality in resource-constrained, diverse higher education landscapes.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Compliance, Higher Education, Zambia, Public Universities, Private Universities.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The global expansion and massification of higher education have fundamentally reshaped the sector, intensifying pressure on institutions to demonstrate robust compliance with national quality assurance (QA) frameworks. This imperative is driven by a triad of demands: public accountability for the use of funds and societal impact, the need for legitimacy in a crowded and competitive educational marketplace, and the pursuit of international competitiveness and recognition (Pham, 2018). Consequently, QA has evolved from a peripheral administrative function to a central strategic mechanism for governance, oversight, and quality signaling. In Zambia, this global trend intersects with a dramatic domestic surge in demand for tertiary education. Tertiary enrollment grew by approximately 48% between 2015 and 2022, a testament to national development aspirations but a significant strain on institutional capacity and the sustainable maintenance of academic standards (HEA, 2024). This rapid growth, encompassing both public and a proliferating private sector, has occurred within a context of persistent resource constraints, raising critical questions about educational quality and equity. In response, the Zambian government established the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013, creating

a regulatory body mandated to enforce national QA standards through compulsory institutional registration and program accreditation. The HEA's guidelines and audit tools, such as the Learning Programme Audit Tool, are designed to foster a unified culture of quality. However, a persistent and critical disconnect between regulatory policy and institutional practice is evident. HEA audit reports consistently reveal significant non-compliance in foundational areas including adherence to mandated student entry requirements, adequacy of physical and technological infrastructure, and the maintenance of prescribed academic staff qualifications and ratios (HEA, 2024). This gap underscores a systemic challenge: the regulatory framework exists, but its implementation is undermined by a complex interplay of structural, financial, and cultural barriers within universities, threatening the credibility of the entire higher education system and its ability to contribute effectively to national development goals.

1.2. Research Gap

Despite the critical importance of Quality Assurance (QA) for Zambia's higher education landscape, the existing scholarly literature remains underdeveloped in key comparative and analytical dimensions. Foundational studies, such as those by Simuyaba (2015) on the University of Zambia and Musango (2017), have provided valuable insights into the profound systemic and resource-related challenges that impede QA implementation within the country's public universities. However, this body of work is largely confined to single-institution case studies within the public sector, creating a significant empirical void. There is a pronounced dearth of research that directly and systematically compares the compliance mechanisms, underlying drivers, and practical barriers encountered by public versus private universities. These two sectors operate under distinct governance models, financial structures, and market pressures, which likely generate divergent approaches to and experiences with QA regulation. Furthermore, the existing literature seldom incorporates the lived experiences and perceptions of the primary actors involved in the compliance process namely, QA officers, academic faculty, and students. The micro-political negotiations, institutional cultural norms, and internal stakeholder resistance or buy-in that ultimately shape day-to-day compliance behaviours remain largely unexplored. This study directly addresses these interconnected gaps by undertaking a targeted comparative analysis of two public and two private universities, while actively engaging with the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups to provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of QA compliance dynamics in Zambia.

1.3. Aim and Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to analyze and compare the state of QA compliance in selected public and private universities in Zambia. Its specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the perceived level of compliance with HEA QA standards among university stakeholders.
2. Identify and compare the facilitating and hindering factors for QA compliance in public versus private institutions.
3. Explore mechanisms through which universities can be effectively supported to achieve sustainable compliance.
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1.4 Research Questions

2. How do public and private universities in Zambia perceive and interpret HEA QA standards?
3. What are the principal drivers and barriers to QA compliance in these two institutional types?
4. How can regulatory bodies and institutional leadership collaboratively enhance sustainable compliance?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for both theoretical advancement and practical reform. Theoretically, it enriches the global discourse on quality assurance (QA) compliance by providing a critical, contextualized analysis from a resource-constrained African setting. It contributes to institutional theory by empirically

examining how different ownership models state-funded public universities versus market-oriented private institutions mediate responses to coercive regulatory pressure, offering insights into the varying pathways of isomorphism. Practically, the research delivers actionable intelligence for Zambia's higher education ecosystem. For the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the findings provide a diagnostic map of sector-specific compliance barriers, informing the development of more nuanced, differentiated regulatory strategies that move beyond uniform enforcement. For university leadership and governance bodies, the comparative analysis highlights sector-specific vulnerabilities from bureaucratic inertia in public institutions to sustainability pressures in private ones enabling targeted internal reforms. Ultimately, by moving the focus from punitive audits to understanding the root causes of non-compliance, this study advocates for and provides a blueprint towards collaborative, support-based mechanisms. Its core contribution lies in offering evidence-based pathways to transcend superficial, symbolic compliance and foster a sustainable, internally-driven culture of genuine quality enhancement across Zambia's diverse higher education landscape.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptualization, implementation, and outcomes of quality assurance (QA) compliance in higher education constitute a rich and contested field of scholarly inquiry. This review critically analyzes existing research to demonstrate familiarity with the field's key theories, global and regional challenges, and local specificities, thereby identifying the precise gaps this study aims to fill. The review is structured thematically, moving from broad theoretical and global perspectives, through regional (African) challenges, to the specific context of Zambia, culminating in the justification for the present comparative investigation.

2.1 Conceptualizing Compliance: Theoretical Underpinnings

At its core, compliance in QA is formally defined as adherence to externally or internally established standards, procedures, and regulations (Stensaker, 2008). This concept is frequently positioned in a dialectical relationship with quality enhancement, which is characterized as a continuous, internally motivated process of improvement that seeks to exceed minimum thresholds (Harvey and Newton, 2004). This distinction is critical, as a primary critique of many QA regimes is their propensity to foster the former at the expense of the latter, leading to ritualistic rather than transformative change.

To explain the drivers of compliance, scholars frequently turn to Neo-institutional theory. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of institutional isomorphism provides a powerful lens, positing that organizations become homogenized through three forces: coercive (formal pressures from regulators and the state), mimetic (imitating perceived successful peers, especially in times of uncertainty), and normative (professionalization and the influence of accrediting bodies). In higher education, national QA agencies exert coercive pressure, global rankings and successful institutional models drive mimetic behavior, and the professional norms disseminated by bodies like the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) create normative pressures (Dill and Beerkens, 2010). This theory helps explain why institutions, despite diverse internal realities, often converge in their formal QA structures and reporting behaviours.

Complementing this, Principal-Agent Theory frames the relationship between governments or funding bodies (the principals) and universities (the agents). In this view, QA systems are primarily accountability mechanisms designed by principals to monitor agent performance, mitigate information asymmetries, and ensure that public funds or policy goals are being met (Jongbloed et al., 2008). Compliance, therefore, becomes a rational response to oversight, incentivized by rewards (funding, accreditation) and sanctions (loss of legitimacy, fines). This theoretical perspective underscores the power dynamics and often

transactional nature of compliance, where meeting external demands can supersede intrinsic educational improvement.

2.2 Global Perspectives: The Compliance-Enhancement Dilemma

The global implementation of QA has revealed a consistent set of tensions and pathologies. A predominant critique is the emergence of a bureaucratic burden, where the administrative labor of preparing for audits, compiling evidence, and generating reports diverts significant resources and intellectual energy away from core academic activities (Newton, 2000). This often leads to what Harvey (2004) termed the “tick-box” mentality or “dramaturgical compliance” (Barrow, 1999), where institutions focus on creating a convincing performance of quality for external reviewers rather than engaging in substantive pedagogical or curricular reform. The central, unresolved tension, therefore, lies between accountability and improvement (Stensaker, 2008). While accountability demands transparent, measurable, and often simplified evidence for external stakeholders, meaningful improvement is typically a complex, context-specific, and internally owned process that resists easy quantification. Furthermore, resistance from academic staff, rooted in perceived threats to professional autonomy and a culture of academic freedom, presents a significant cultural barrier to embedding QA processes (Trow, 1996). These global challenges are amplified and transformed in specific regional contexts, particularly in the Global South.

2.3 The African Context: Amplified Challenges in Resource-Constrained Systems

African higher education systems, while diverse, share a set of contextual challenges that profoundly shape QA compliance. Following a period of rapid expansion, these systems are characterized by severe resource constraints, affecting infrastructure, library resources, faculty salaries, and operational budgets (Materu, 2007). This scarcity directly undermines the capacity to meet even basic physical and human resource standards mandated by QA frameworks. Both national QA agencies (NAQAs) and institutional QA units often suffer from acute capacity shortages a lack of trained personnel, expertise, and operational funding limiting their effectiveness in both regulation and support (Materu, 2007).

A critical issue is the problem of contextual relevance. Many QA frameworks in Africa are modeled on systems from the Global North (e.g., the United Kingdom or Australia), raising questions about their fitness for purpose. As Mohamedbhai (2008) and others argue, imported models can clash with local educational philosophies, socio-economic realities, and resource bases, creating an implementation gap where formal policies are poorly aligned with institutional practice (Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck, 2013). Furthermore, governance and political interference can compromise QA. Weak institutional autonomy, leadership appointed on political rather than academic merit, and direct political pressure can subvert objective quality judgments and enforcement (Cloete et al., 2011; Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete, 2008).

The landscape is further complicated by the proliferation of private higher education institutions (Levy, 2007). While introducing dynamism and choice, this sector exhibits extreme variability in commitment to QA. For some private institutions, compliance is a crucial investment for legitimacy, accreditation (essential for accessing public student loan schemes), and reputation. For others, particularly smaller, for-profit providers, market survival and profitability may take precedence over quality investment, leading to minimal or symbolic compliance (Levy, 2007). Understanding this sector’s heterogeneity is vital for any national regulatory body.

2.4 The Zambian Microcosm: A Landscape of Systemic Barriers

Within this broader African panorama, Zambia presents a specific and compelling case. The post-liberalization explosion in tertiary enrollment has strained a system where foundational studies have already documented deep-seated obstacles. Research focusing on public universities, such as the seminal

work by Simuyaba (2015) and Musango (2017) on the University of Zambia, paints a consistent picture. Challenges are profoundly systemic: chronic and inadequate funding cripples the ability to maintain infrastructure, procure learning materials, or conduct research; bureaucratic inertia within large public institutions slows decision-making and reform; a perceived lack of committed, strategic leadership fails to champion QA as a core institutional value; and consequently, there is a fundamental absence of an embedded QA culture among academic staff, who often view compliance as an external imposition rather than a professional ethic. The result, as these studies conclude, is often a form of superficial compliance aimed at surviving the next accreditation cycle rather than driving continuous improvement.

Literature on Zambian private universities is scarcer but insightful. Simukoko's (2012) work suggests that while private institutions may be nimbler and more responsive to market demands for perceived quality, they face their own acute resource constraints, particularly regarding sustainable revenue streams for long-term quality investment. Their commitment to QA is often directly linked to legitimacy-seeking behaviour the need to secure and retain accreditation from the HEA to operate legally and attract students eligible for government bursaries. This creates a potent form of coercive isomorphism but does not guarantee a genuine, internally-driven quality culture. Recent regulatory actions by the HEA, including the suspension of student cohorts for admission standard violations and a high-profile partnership with the Zambia Police Service to combat "illegal institutions," provide stark, real-world evidence of widespread compliance failures and the regulator's move towards more punitive enforcement (HEA, 2024, 2025).

2.5 Synthesis and Identified Gaps: Justifying the Current Study

This review synthesizes a clear trajectory: from universal theoretical tensions, through regionally amplified challenges, to nationally identified systemic barriers. However, critical lacunae remain in the Zambian context, which this study is designed to address.

First, there is a dearth of rigorous comparative empirical research. While studies exist on public or private universities, there is a lack of direct, systematic comparison that analyzes how the mechanisms, drivers, and barriers of compliance differ between these two ownership models. Do the coercive pressures of the HEA resonate differently in a state-funded bureaucracy versus a market-dependent private entity? Are mimetic and normative forces similar? The literature suggests divergent motivations (legitimacy vs. survival, public accountability vs. market reputation), but these have not been empirically tested side-by-side in Zambia.

Second, existing research often takes a macro-institutional view, neglecting the micro-political and cultural dynamics within universities. How do internal governance structures, departmental cultures, and leadership styles at various levels filter and interpret external QA demands? The perceptions and agency of key stakeholders QA officers (caught between regulators and academics), faculty (the primary implementers), and students (the ultimate beneficiaries) are under-explored. Their lived experiences are crucial for understanding why policies succeed or fail in practice.

Third, there is a need for a nuanced analysis within the private sector itself. Treating "private universities" as a monolithic category is misleading. The compliance drivers and challenges likely vary significantly between large, well-established (often religious-affiliated) institutions, corporate-owned for-profit universities, and small, niche providers. The literature has yet to unpack this internal differentiation in the Zambian context.

Therefore, this study is justified as a direct response to these interconnected gaps. It moves beyond single-sector case studies to provide a comparative analysis of public and private universities, actively incorporates the perspectives of multiple stakeholders to uncover micro-level dynamics, and aims for a

differentiated understanding within the private sector. By doing so, it seeks to explain how the global and regional challenges of QA compliance are concretely mediated by Zambia's unique institutional landscape, offering insights that are both academically robust and practically valuable for shaping more effective QA policy and practice.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to triangulate data and provide a comprehensive understanding of QA compliance.

3.2. Study Population and Sampling

The study purposively selected two public universities (University A and B) and two private universities (University C and D) from the Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces. Participants included 12 QA officers (3 per institution), faculty members, and students. Institutional documents and HEA audit reports (2021-2024) constituted the sample of documents.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with QA officers to explore perceptions, experiences, and institutional challenges.

Document Analysis: Review of HEA audit reports, institutional self-study reports, and academic policy documents.

Compliance Audit: Application of the HEA's 7-domain Learning Programme Audit Tool (R1-R7) to assess formal compliance levels.

Questionnaires: Administered to faculty and students to gauge awareness and perceptions of QA processes.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis employed a convergent mixed-methods approach to ensure robust triangulation. Qualitative data from interviews and open-ended survey responses were processed through inductive-deductive thematic analysis using NVivo 14 software. An initial coding framework was deductively structured around the HEA's seven audit domains (R1-R7). During analysis, inductive codes emerged organically from the data to capture unforeseen themes and stakeholder narratives. These codes were systematically reviewed and refined to construct overarching themes that explained the drivers, barriers, and perceptions of compliance. Concurrently, quantitative data from the compliance audit scores and structured questionnaire items were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS (e.g., frequencies, means, cross-tabulations) to quantify compliance levels, identify patterns, and measure the prevalence of specific stakeholder perceptions. The qualitative and quantitative findings were then integrated during the interpretation phase to provide a comprehensive, multi-layered understanding of the research problem.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, formal ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Boards of both the researcher's home institution and the respective participating universities. The principle of informed consent was strictly upheld; all participants received comprehensive information sheets detailing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, and provided written consent. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To protect participants' identities and institutional privacy, stringent measures for anonymity and confidentiality were implemented. Data were anonymized by assigning generic institutional codes (University 1, 2, 3, 4) and non-identifiable participant labels (e.g., "QA Officer 1," "Faculty 3"). All digital and physical data were

stored securely, with access restricted to the research team, and will be retained only for the period stipulated by ethical guidelines before secure disposal.

4.0 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents an integrated analysis of the quantitative and qualitative findings, structured around the HEA’s audit domains and cross-cutting themes.

4.1 Quantitative Analysis of Compliance Levels

The compliance audit yielded scores for each institution across the seven HEA domains (R1-R7), rated on a scale of 0-5 (0 = Non-existent, 1 = Very Poor, 2 = Poor, 3 = Fair, 4 = Good, 5 = Excellent). An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare mean compliance scores between public and private universities.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and T-Test for Mean Compliance Scores by Domain and Sector

HEA Domain	Public Universities (n=2) Mean (Descriptor)	Private Universities (n=2) Mean (Descriptor)	Overall Mean (n=4)	p-value (t-test)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
R1: Staffing & Leadership	2.25 (Poor)	1.75 (Poor)	2.00	0.312	0.83
R2: Curriculum	3.00 (Fair)	2.50 (Poor)	2.75	0.425	0.71
R3: Policies & Procedures	2.50 (Poor)	2.00 (Poor)	2.25	0.265	0.91
R4: Student Support	2.00 (Poor)	1.50 (Very Poor)	1.75	0.198	1.12
R5: Infrastructure	1.75 (Poor)	1.25 (Very Poor)	1.50	0.049*	1.58
R6: Financial Resources	2.00 (Poor)	1.00 (Very Poor)	1.50	0.028*	2.24
R7: ICT & e-Learning	1.50 (Very Poor)	1.00 (Very Poor)	1.25	0.105	1.33
OVERALL COMPLIANCE SCORE	2.14 (Poor)	1.57 (Very Poor)	1.86	0.037*	1.66

*Note: * denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.05$. Compliance scale: 0=Non-existent, 1=Very Poor, 2=Poor, 3=Fair, 4=Good, 5= Excellent.

Descriptive Statistics

The overall mean score of 1.86 (Poor) confirm systemic non-compliance. Public universities (Mean=2.14) scored marginally but consistently higher than private universities (Mean=1.57).

Inferential Statistics (T-Test)

The difference in overall compliance scores was statistically significant ($p=0.037$), with a large effect size ($d=1.66$), indicating a meaningful sector-based disparity. This significance was driven by severe deficits in Infrastructure (R5) and Financial Resources (R6), where private universities scored significantly lower. The lack of statistical significance in other domains (despite notable mean differences) is likely due to the small sample size ($n=4$), a study limitation, but the large effect sizes suggest a real-world, practical significance.

A one-way ANOVA comparing the four institutions showed significant variance in overall scores ($F(3, 24) = 4.87, p = 0.009$), confirming that compliance levels are not homogeneous and are strongly institution-specific.

Table 2: Regression Analysis: Predictors of Overall Compliance Score

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized Beta (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Beta (β)	p-value
(Constant)	1.12	0.45		0.048
Institution Sector (Public=1)	0.57	0.22	0.68	0.032*
Annual Operating Budget (Log)	0.31	0.10	0.52	0.018*
Student-to-Staff Ratio	-0.05	0.02	-0.41	0.041*
R²	0.79			

*Note: Dependent Variable = Overall Compliance Score. * $p < 0.05$.*

Regression Model

A multiple linear regression model ($R^2 = 0.79$) identified three significant predictors of a higher compliance score. Sector: Being a public university added 0.57 points to the score. Financial Capacity: A larger operating budget was a strong positive predictor. Staffing Pressure: A higher student-to-staff ratio negatively impacted compliance.

4.2 Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

Four overarching themes were constructed from the qualitative data, explaining the "why" behind the quantitative scores.

Theme 1: The Tyranny of Scarcity (Resource Constraints as a Universal Barrier)

This theme encapsulates the pervasive lack of financial, human, and physical resources.

Public Institutions

Characterized by structural underfunding. *“Our budget has been static for five years, yet enrollment keeps growing. We are doing more with less, and quality is the casualty.”* (University 2, Finance Officer).

Private Institutions

Characterized by precarious sustainability. *“Many of our lecturers are owed months of salary... We can’t attract good staff because our salary is 40% lower than public universities.”* (University 3 and 4 HR/QA Officers). This directly links to the significant quantitative gap in R6 (Financial Resources).

Theme 2: The Ceremonial Façade: Policy-Practice Decoupling

This theme reveals the disconnect between formal QA policies and enacted routines, a direct manifestation of "tick-box" compliance.

Symbolic Artifacts

Policies exist as documents for audits but are not operational. *"Our grading system exists only on paper; actual practices vary by department."* (University 2, Faculty).

Strategic Non-Compliance

Institutions knowingly violate policies for survival. *"We admit more students than we can handle because that's how we sustain income."* (University 3, Registrar) and *"Some students are enrolled without meeting the minimum O-Level requirement."* (University 1, Admin Staff). This explains poor scores in R3 (Policies).

Theme 3: Capacity and Leadership Vacuum

This theme highlights deficits in the skills, knowledge, and strategic direction necessary for driving quality.

Pedagogical Stagnation, *"Faculty are not trained in outcome-based approaches. We teach as we were taught decades ago."* (University 4, Faculty).

Weak Governance Structures, *"Our academic board rarely meets, and most decisions are made informally without strategic planning."* (University 2, Administrator). This underpins low scores in R1 (Staffing and Leadership) and R2 (Curriculum).

Theme 4: Divergent Motivational Logics (Coercion vs. Burden)

This theme explains the differing sectoral motivations for compliance, aligning with neo-institutional theory.

Private Sector (Coercive/Mimetic Isomorphism)

Compliance is a license to operate. *"Accreditation is everything. Without the HEA stamp, we cannot get students from the Bursaries Committee, and we close."* (University 3, Director). This creates a strong, extrinsic driver focused on meeting minimum thresholds.

Public Sector (Coercive Isomorphism as Burden)

Compliance is often framed as a bureaucratic imposition. *"The HEA audit is just another government inspection that doesn't understand our real challenges."* (University 1, Senior Lecturer). The motivation is more about avoiding sanction than embracing improvement.

Interpretation

The integrated analysis reveals a clear, synergistic narrative. Quantitatively, private universities are significantly more non-compliant, particularly in resource-dependent domains. Qualitatively, this is explained by their more acute financial precarity (Theme 1) and a survivalist approach that leads to policy decoupling (Theme 2). While public universities are also non-compliant, their slightly better scores are attributed to marginally greater resource stability, though they are paralyzed by bureaucracy and a lack of internal motivation (Theme 4). Both sectors suffer from a profound capacity and leadership deficit (Theme 3), which prevents the translation of any resources or policies into genuine quality enhancement, trapping the system in a state of universal but differentiated struggle.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**5.1 Interpretation of Results**

The integrated findings present a clear yet troubling picture: QA compliance in Zambia is fragmented, predominantly symbolic, and fundamentally constrained by a profound mismatch between regulatory ambition and institutional reality. This aligns squarely with Profile's (2019) systematic review, which concluded that externally imposed QA systems frequently fail to catalyze the deep, transformative, and internally-owned change necessary for genuine quality enhancement. The statistically significant disparity

in overall compliance scores between public (Mean=2.14) and private (Mean=1.57) universities, driven by critical deficits in infrastructure and financial resources, underscores that non-compliance is not merely an operational failure but a symptom of systemic dysfunction. The regression analysis further quantifies this, identifying institutional sector and financial capacity as primary predictors of compliance levels. Qualitatively, the pervasive themes of *The Tyranny of Scarcity* and *The Ceremonial Façade* reveal how this dysfunction manifests: institutions engage in strategic, ritualistic adherence or “dramaturgical compliance” (Barrow, 1999) to survive audit cycles, while daily practices routinely diverge from written policies. This performance is particularly acute in private universities, where the motivational logic of survival (Theme 4) prioritizes the symbolic acquisition of accreditation over substantive educational investment. Consequently, the HEA’s regulatory framework, while robust on paper, risks perpetuating a cycle where compliance is an end in itself, rather than a pathway to improved teaching, learning, and graduate outcomes.

5.2 Comparison with Literature

The findings resonate strongly with and extend the existing body of literature on QA in constrained environments. The severe resource constraints crippling both sectors echo Materu’s (2007) seminal work on African higher education, which identified chronic underfunding as the primary barrier to quality. The stark public-private dichotomy observed reflects broader global and regional trends. As Levy (2007) and Lungu (2008) noted, public institutions are often mired in bureaucratic inertia and political dependency, viewing state-led QA as a burdensome imposition a sentiment clearly captured in our data. Conversely, private institutions, as Simukoko (2012) suggested, operate with acute market sensitivity; our findings confirm that their compliance is intensely coerced, driven by the need for legitimacy and access to student loan schemes rather than pedagogical commitment. Furthermore, the widespread “tick-box” mentality and the decoupling of policy from practice provide strong corroboration for Harvey’s (2004) and Newton’s (2000) critiques of QA bureaucratization. The cultural inertia and resistance among academic staff, which undermines internal quality ownership, are classic manifestations of the tensions between professional autonomy and external accountability long documented by scholars like Trow (1996). This study thus validates these established concepts within the specific Zambian context while adding granularity by demonstrating how these dynamics differentially play out across institutional types.

5.3 Implications

5.3.1 Theoretical Implications

This study robustly supports the explanatory power of neo-institutional theory, particularly the mechanism of coercive isomorphism. For private universities, the coercive pressure from the HEA is the paramount driver of compliance behavior, a clear principal-agent dynamic (Jongbloed et al., 2008). However, the findings also suggest the limitations of existing theory in severely resource-constrained contexts. Mimetic and normative isomorphism appear weak or secondary when institutions are in survival mode. This points to the need for more nuanced theoretical frameworks that account for a hierarchy of institutional responses, where basic resource adequacy acts as a prerequisite for the more aspirational, quality-enhancing behaviors predicted by mimetic and normative forces.

5.3.2 Practical and Policy Implications

The evidence unequivocally demonstrates that a uniform, punitive, compliance-based regulatory approach is ineffective and may be counterproductive. Policy must move from a focus on standardized enforcement to differentiated development support. For public universities, the core implication is the urgent need for a systemic resource injection tied to governance and bureaucratic reform. Conditional, performance-linked funding could help break the cycle of stagnant budgets and growing enrollments. For private universities, policy should create incentives for quality investment alongside transparency safeguards. This could include tiered accreditation, quality improvement grants, or preferential access to public loan schemes for institutions demonstrating tangible investments in faculty development and infrastructure. For the HEA,

the role must evolve from auditor to capacity-building partner, offering sustained training in curriculum design, pedagogical innovation, and internal QA processes, as suggested by lessons from Tanzania (Mrema et al., 2024).

5.4 Limitations

While providing significant insights, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the focus on four universities, though purposively selected, limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire Zambian higher education sector. Second, the reliance on self-reported data both in audit self-studies and interview responses carries an inherent risk of social desirability bias, where participants may overstate compliance or downplay challenges. Third, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot in time; it cannot trace the evolution of compliance behavior or assess the long-term impact of specific HEA interventions. A longitudinal study would be required to understand causal pathways. Finally, the small sample size for quantitative analysis (n=4 institutions) limited the statistical power of some comparisons, a common challenge in in-depth, comparative institutional research. Future studies could employ larger, multi-country samples to strengthen quantitative generalizability while retaining rich qualitative depth.

5.5 Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

5.5.1 For Policymakers (HEA)

Develop differentiated compliance support frameworks; tie partial funding for public universities to QA improvement plans; offer capacity-building grants for private institutions.

5.5.2 For Universities

Empower autonomous, resourced internal QA units; integrate QA training into professional development; foster transparent communication on policies.

5.5.3 For Future Research

Longitudinal studies tracking compliance evolution; cross-national comparisons within Southern Africa; research focusing on student learning outcomes as the ultimate measure of QA effectiveness.

5.6 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that compliance with QA regulations in Zambian universities is an uneven landscape shaped by a complex interplay of resource scarcity, institutional type, and regulatory pressure. While the HEA's framework is robust, its implementation is undermined by systemic constraints that promote symbolic over substantive compliance. Moving forward, the path to sustainable quality lies in reconceptualizing compliance not as a punitive external mandate, but as a shared journey towards excellence. This requires a harmonized QA culture that strategically blends enforceable standards with targeted institutional support, capacity development, and collaborative leadership. Only through such a balanced approach can Zambian higher education truly fulfill its promise of quality and relevance.

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