Quality Assurance Mechanisms that Enhances Academic and Administrative Performance in Public Higher Learning Institutions in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

The study evaluated how the quality assurance mechanisms in Higher learning institutions in Zambia enhances academic and administrative performance. The objective was to evaluate quality assurance mechanism effectiveness in enhancing academic and administrative performance. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, collecting quantitative data through questionnaires from 89 academic staff and qualitative data through interviews with 20 administrative staff and Quality Assurance Directorate personnel. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and thematic analysis. Quality assurance mechanisms showed varying effectiveness across functions, with student assessment rated highest (mean=1.92). Regression analysis identified awareness level as the strongest predictor of perceived effectiveness (β=0.412, $p<0.001$). Training status was the strongest predictor of high staff engagement (OR=4.816, p=0.012), with trained staff nearly five times more likely to engage actively. Based on these findings, the study recommends implementing a tiered quality assurance training framework, developing discipline-sensitive quality assurance approaches, and establishing a decentralized quality assurance support structure with designated officers in each school.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Academic Performance, Administrative engagement, Institutional Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance in higher education has become increasingly crucial for maintaining academic standards and institutional effectiveness. This study analyses quality assurance mechanisms in public universities in Zambia, focusing effectiveness. Quality assurance has become an essential element of higher education management worldwide. As highlighted by Daka (2023), the evolution of quality assurance practices has been driven by increasing demands for accountability and standardization in higher education institutions. Public universities, defined as higher education institutions that receive substantial funding from government sources and operate under state governance structures, face unique quality assurance challenges.

In response to regional challenges and regulatory requirements, Zambian higher education institutions have developed distinctive approaches to quality assurance. The establishment of national quality frameworks and regulatory bodies has provided a foundation for institutional quality management systems. This development has been particularly significant for public universities, which must balance international standards with local needs while operating within resource constraints and evolving regulatory environments (Bwalya, 2023).

The evolution of quality assurance in public universities reflects institutions growth and broader developments in higher education management. The rapid expansion in academic programs, student numbers, and academic

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staff necessitated more structured approaches to maintaining educational standards in these universities. Most public universities have moved towards having more structured quality assurance mechanisms, culminating in the establishment of the Directorate of Quality Assurance. This development aligns with global trends in higher education quality management and the increasing recognition of systematic quality assurance as essential for institutional effectiveness (Mushumba et al., 2024).

Academic quality assurance operates through several interconnected mechanisms. Program development and review processes involve systematic curriculum assessment, stakeholder consultation, and alignment with national qualification frameworks as prescribed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Zambia Qualifications Authority (ZAQA). Teaching and learning quality is monitored through course evaluation systems, peer review processes, and student feedback mechanisms (Kajala & Daka, 2023). The university maintains rigorous assessment and examination procedures, including external examination systems, moderation processes, and results verification protocols.

Staff development forms a critical component of public university's quality assurance framework. The institutions implement regular teaching methodology workshops, research capacity building programs, and professional development initiatives to enhance academic staff competencies. Performance evaluation systems ensure continuous monitoring and improvement of teaching effectiveness (Zimba, 2021). These mechanisms are supported by institutional policies that promote academic excellence and maintain educational standards.

Higher education institutions implement structured quality assurance mechanisms through Quality Assurance Committees of Senate (QAC) and Quality Assurance Directorates (QAD) to maintain academic standards. This approach aligns with Shams's (2017) stakeholder-centred model, which offers a structure for examining the interactions between various institutional participants in quality assurance processes.

Recent studies have identified key factors affecting successful quality assurance implementation in higher education institutions. Nguyen et al. (2021) highlight the significance of institutional culture, leadership support, and staff engagement in quality assurance processes. Similarly, Khdair (2022) demonstrates that quality assurance systems significantly affect employee performance in higher education institutions. These findings emphasize the vital role of staff understanding and engagement in successful quality assurance implementation.

Mohammed (2023) further shows that university administrators' management abilities significantly influence quality assurance effectiveness, yet staff views often remain unexplored. While existing research provides valuable information about quality assurance implementation in African higher education, there remains a need for institution-specific studies that consider local conditions.

Statement of the Problem

Quality assurance has become important for universities worldwide, serving as a key mechanism for maintaining educational standards and institutional effectiveness. In public universities, quality assurance mechanisms have been established to enhance academic and administrative performance. However, as Nguyen et al. (2021) notes, the mere existence of such systems does not guarantee their effectiveness.

Research by Mohammed (2023) indicates that management capacity affects quality assurance effectiveness, yet little attention has been paid to understanding how this enhances academic and administrative performance. This knowledge gap hinders the university's ability to implement and improve its quality assurance systems effectively. Studies by Ibrahim (2021) demonstrate that quality assurance practices directly affect academic staff effectiveness, suggesting that poor implementation can negatively impact teaching quality and student learning outcomes. This research problem requires immediate attention as it affects the university's ability to maintain and improve academic standards.

Objective of the Study

To evaluate the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms in enhancing academic and administrative performance at one of the public university in Zambia.

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LITERATURE REVIEWED AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Literature Reviewed

A methodologically distinct contribution by Khdair (2022) analysed quality assurance systems' impact on employee performance in Iraqi higher education institutions through comprehensive quantitative research involving 245 participants across multiple universities. The study employed sophisticated regression analysis techniques, supported by Rashid and Ahmad's (2016) work on lecturer performance systems, establishing strong correlations between quality assurance implementation and staff performance metrics. Extensive statistical analysis revealed significant relationships between quality assurance mechanisms and various performance indicators, including teaching effectiveness, research output, and administrative efficiency. Ibrahim et al.'s (2021) research on academic staff effectiveness reinforced these findings, highlighting the crucial role of quality assurance in enhancing institutional performance. However, the study's purely quantitative approach created several significant limitations: it failed to explore underlying reasons for staff resistance to quality assurance mechanisms, a crucial factor in implementation success. The research also neglected to examine qualitative aspects of staff engagement and motivation, focusing solely on measurable performance metrics. Additionally, the study did not adequately address how cultural factors and institutional context influence quality assurance effectiveness. These limitations particularly affect understanding of how quality assurance mechanisms can be effectively implemented in different institutional contexts. The present research addresses these gaps through mixed-methods examination of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of staff engagement with quality assurance processes at the University of Zambia, providing a more comprehensive understanding of implementation dynamics.

Advancing regional perspectives, Amoako and Asamoah-Gyimah (2020) explored quality service indicators in Ghanaian universities through comprehensive research combining 450 surveys with focus group discussions across three major institutions. Their findings, supported by Jansiri's (2023) analysis of educational quality assurance collaboration, revealed significant gaps between institutional quality policies and actual implementation practices. Biswakarma's (2023) research on quality assurance in hospitality education reinforced these findings regarding implementation challenges, particularly in resource allocation and staff development. The study employed a robust mixed-methods approach to identify service quality gaps, demonstrating that staff understanding of quality assurance mechanisms directly influences service delivery effectiveness. Peter et al.'s (2023) evaluation of administrative support services further validated the importance of staff engagement in quality implementation. Nevertheless, the research exhibited several limitations: it failed to examine how departmental cultures influence quality implementation, overlooked the role of institutional leadership in supporting quality initiatives, and did not adequately address staff resistance to quality assurance mechanisms. The study also neglected to investigate how communication patterns between different institutional levels affect implementation success. The present research addresses these limitations through comprehensive examination of organizational culture, leadership support, and communication patterns at the University of Zambia, providing practical insights for improving quality assurance implementation in African higher education contexts.

Providing a West African perspective, Ibrahim (2021) examined quality assurance practices as determinants of academic staff effectiveness in Nigerian polytechnics through extensive quantitative research involving 285 participants across multiple institutions. However, the study's purely quantitative approach created several limitations: it neglected to explore qualitative aspects of staff engagement with quality systems, failed to examine how institutional support mechanisms influence implementation success, and overlooked the role of staff motivation in quality assurance practices. Furthermore, the research did not adequately address how resource constraints affect implementation effectiveness. The present research addresses these limitations through a mixed-methods investigation at the University of Zambia, incorporating both statistical analysis and in-depth qualitative exploration of staff experiences with quality assurance systems.

Kajala and Daka (2023) investigated quality assurance systems in private universities within Lusaka district through a case study approach combining questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Their research, supported by regional studies on private higher education, revealed significant challenges in infrastructure development, staff credentials verification, and financial sustainability. The study employed a systematic analysis of institutional operations, demonstrating that financial capacity significantly influences quality assurance

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implementation. Their findings align with Bwalya's (2023) observations regarding resource constraints in Zambian higher education institutions. However, the research exhibited several critical limitations: it focused exclusively on private institutions, overlooking the unique dynamics of public universities; failed to examine how institutional leadership influences quality implementation; and did not adequately address staff development needs in quality assurance processes. Additionally, the study neglected to investigate how quality assurance mechanisms affect teaching and learning outcomes. The present research addresses these gaps through comprehensive examination of public university dynamics at the University of Zambia, incorporating analysis of leadership roles, staff development, and educational outcomes.

Chizyuka and Daka (2021) examined organisational structure and the provision of quality education in both private and public learning institutions. Through extensive document analysis and stakeholder interviews involving academic staff members, the research demonstrated how managerial practices affect staff engagement with quality assurance processes. Mpelo and Daka (2024) research on implementation of performance management in Jesuit owned learning institutions further validated these findings regarding the impact of managerial practices on quality processes. The study provided comprehensive analysis of how different management styles influence staff participation in quality assurance activities, particularly highlighting the negative effects of excessive bureaucratization. The research also examined how institutional policies and procedures either facilitate or impede quality assurance implementation, demonstrating the importance of balanced approaches that respect academic autonomy. However, the study failed to examine specific awareness levels among different staff categories, a crucial factor in implementation success. The research also overlooked implementation challenges in resource-constrained environments, where management approaches may need to be adapted to local conditions. Additionally, the study did not adequately address cultural factors affecting quality assurance effectiveness, particularly in non-Western educational contexts. These limitations significantly affect its applicability to developing nation contexts, where different organizational cultures and resource constraints create unique implementation challenges. The present research addresses these gaps through detailed examination of staff perspectives and implementation challenges in public universities in Zambia, focusing particularly on how management approaches can be adapted to local institutional contexts while maintaining effective quality assurance systems.

The study by Sampe and Arifin's (2024) analysis of internal quality assurance systems, demonstrated the critical relationship between institutional support structures and implementation success. The research employed multiple data collection methods, including surveys, interviews, and document analysis, revealing significant correlations between staff development programs and quality assurance effectiveness. Through systematic evaluation of implementation processes, the study identified key success factors including technological infrastructure, staff training programs, and communication systems. Nsama, Daka and Lisulo (2024) exploration of the perceptions of academic staff on performance appraisals in private universities further reinforced these findings regarding the importance of institutional support mechanisms. The research provided detailed insights into how different institutional factors interact to influence quality assurance outcomes. Despite its methodological rigor, the study exhibited several significant limitations: it focused primarily on online education contexts, neglecting traditional institutional settings where different implementation dynamics exist. The research also failed to examine how staff members' understanding and awareness levels influence implementation success, a crucial factor in quality assurance effectiveness. Additionally, the study did not adequately address cultural factors affecting quality assurance implementation in different institutional contexts, particularly in developing nations where resource constraints and organizational cultures create unique challenges. These limitations affect the study's applicability to traditional higher education settings, especially in developing countries where online education may not be the primary mode of delivery. The current study addresses these gaps through comprehensive examination of both traditional and modern quality assurance approaches at one of the public university in Zambia, incorporating analysis of staff awareness, understanding, and implementation challenges across different institutional contexts. This approach will provide valuable insights into how quality assurance mechanisms can be effectively implemented in traditional university settings within developing nations.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework integrates three complementary theories to comprehensively address the study's objectives. Total Quality Management Theory provides a process-oriented perspective on how staff awareness

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develops through systematic quality procedures, directly addressing the first research objective. Stakeholder Theory offers a relational lens for evaluating effectiveness by examining how diverse stakeholder needs influence quality mechanism outcomes, supporting the second objective. Institutional Theory completes the framework by explaining implementation challenges through organizational pressures and legitimacy concerns, fulfilling the third objective. This triangulated approach creates analytical depth by examining quality assurance from operational, relational, and structural perspectives while maintaining clear connections to the research questions.

Total Quality Management (TQM) Theory, developed by Deming (1986) and enhanced by Juran (1989), provides a framework for understanding staff awareness and engagement in quality assurance processes. The theory emphasizes continuous improvement, customer focus, and total employee involvement in quality management. In higher education contexts, TQM principles help explain how staff awareness and understanding develop through systematic quality processes. The theory's emphasis on employee involvement, as supported by Sutanto et al.'s (2018) research on TQM planning in higher education, demonstrates that staff awareness significantly influences quality implementation success.

METHODOLODY

The study adopted a pragmatic paradigm to analyse how quality assurance mechanisms enhances academic and administrative performance. The philosophical foundation emphasized practical utility and problem-solving, focusing on what worked in quality assurance implementation while considering both measurable outcomes and lived experiences. This approach enabled the study to generate actionable insights for improving quality assurance mechanisms at the public university through statistical analysis.

This dual approach enabled triangulation of findings, as demonstrated by Mohammed (2023) in analysing management capacity in quality assurance implementation. This approach of getting information from both academic and administrative staff enabled triangulation of findings, as demonstrated by Mohammed (2023) in analysing management capacity in quality assurance implementation.

The study population consisted of academic and administrative staff of the public university who interacted with quality assurance mechanisms. The public university chosen is one of the oldest and biggest university giving it an acceptable representation of public universities. This included three distinct categories of academic staff Heads of Department (HODs), and Deans who implemented and oversaw quality assurance processes in teaching, research, and assessment activities. Then the administrative staff, including Senior Administrative Officers and Assistant Registrars in the respective schools and lastly staff from the Directorate of Quality Assurance, which functioned as a centralized unit for the entire university specialized quality assurance officers who developed policies, monitored compliance, and provided technical support to academic units. The inclusion of staff from various roles and levels ensured representation of different perspectives on quality assurance implementation, as each group interacted with these mechanisms in distinct ways through their daily responsibilities.

The study used a sample size of 120 participants comprising of 100 academic staff, 10 administrative staff and 5 staff from directorate department and 5 students who were Association leaders of the university. The study used stratified random sampling for the quantitative phase and purposive sampling for the qualitative phase. Stratification ensured proportional representation of academic and administrative staff across departments, following Mensah's (2022) methodology for studying internal quality assurance practices. The study employed the questionnaire to collect data. Questionnaires were self-administered through departmental distribution with a one-week completion window.

Quantitative data analysis employed both descriptive and inferential statistical methods using SPSS version 26 software. Descriptive analysis included frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations to measure perceived effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms. Multiple linear regression models were developed to identify predictors of quality assurance effectiveness.

Qualitative data underwent systematic thematic analysis following Cardoso et al.'s (2015) framework. The process involved open coding of interview transcripts, categorization of codes into emerging themes, and

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pattern identification across respondent narratives. NVivo 12 software facilitated the organization and coding of qualitative data. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred through side-by-side comparison of statistical results and thematic outcomes, with convergence and divergence points identified to develop an understanding of staff perceptions. The mixed methods integration followed Creswell's convergent parallel design model, with equal weighting given to both data types.

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained formal ethical clearance All participants received detailed information sheets explaining the study purpose, procedures, voluntary nature of participation, and potential benefits. Signed consent forms were collected from all respondents before questionnaire distribution or interview commencement, with particular emphasis on participants' right to decline answering specific questions or withdraw entirely without penalty.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Questionnaires used identification codes rather than names, and interview recordings were transcribed with pseudonyms replacing actual identities. All data was stored in password-protected digital formats and locked cabinets for physical documents, with access restricted to the researcher and supervisor.

Presentation of the Findings

Descriptive analysis

The descriptive analysis reveals which quality processes staff consider most successful in enhancing performance and which mechanisms show limited perceived impact. These effectiveness perceptions provide valuable feedback on current quality systems, highlighting areas of institutional strength and identifying potential weaknesses requiring intervention to optimize quality assurance outcomes.

Table 1: Effectiveness of Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Question	Very Effective	Effective	Neutral	Less Effective	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teaching Quality	35 (39.33%)	19 (21.35%)	21 (23.60%)	14 (15.73%)	2.16	1.12
Administrative Processes	35 (39.33%)	19 (21.35%)	28 (31.46%)	7 (7.87%)	2.08	1.01
Curriculum Development	28 (31.46%)	19 (21.35%)	28 (31.46%)	14 (15.73%)	2.31	1.08
Student Assessment	42 (47.19%)	19 (21.35%)	21 (23.60%)	7 (7.87%)	1.92	1.01

Source: Author (2025)

Table 4.5 presents data on staff perceptions regarding the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms across four key areas at the University of Zambia. Student assessment emerges as the area where quality assurance mechanisms are perceived as most effective, with a mean score of 1.92 and nearly half of respondents (47.19%) rating these mechanisms as very effective. Administrative processes follow closely with a mean score of 2.08, with teaching quality (mean 2.16) and curriculum development (mean 2.31) perceived as relatively less effective. The implications of these findings are significant for institutional quality management strategies. The university appears to have implemented particularly successful quality assurance mechanisms for student assessment, suggesting these practices could serve as internal benchmarks for other areas. The strong performance in administrative processes indicates that non-academic quality systems are functioning well, which supports overall institutional effectiveness.

Teaching quality mechanisms, while rated positively by 60.68% of respondents (combining very effective and effective ratings), show room for improvement with 39.33% of staff rating them as neutral or less effective. This finding has implications for the university's core educational mission, suggesting a need to strengthen quality assurance in teaching practices. The standard deviation of 1.12 indicates greater variability in perceptions about teaching quality mechanisms compared to other areas, implying inconsistent implementation

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across departments or schools. The university should investigate these variations to identify both best practices and areas requiring intervention to ensure more consistent teaching quality standards.

Curriculum development shows the lowest effectiveness ratings with a mean of 2.31 and 47.19% of respondents rating these mechanisms as neutral or less effective. This finding is particularly concerning as curriculum quality forms the foundation of educational offerings. The implications point to a critical gap in the university's quality assurance framework that could affect program relevance, graduate competitiveness, and institutional reputation. The university should prioritize reviewing and strengthening curriculum development quality mechanisms, potentially through enhanced stakeholder involvement, more frequent review cycles, and better alignment with external benchmarks. The relatively even distribution across rating categories for curriculum development further suggests a lack of consistency in implementation, requiring a more systematic approach to curriculum quality assurance across all academic units.

Inferential Analysis

The inferential analysis used ANOVA as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Effectiveness Ratings Across Schools (ANOVA)

School	Mean Rating	Standard Deviation	F-value	df	p-value
Education	4.06	0.73	3.427	4,84	0.012*
Humanities	3.98	0.78			
Natural Sciences	3.77	0.83			
Graduate Studies	3.66	0.89			
Engineering	3.56	0.92			

*$p < 0.05$, indicating significant differences between groups

Source: Author (2025)

Table 2 reveals statistically significant differences in perceived effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms across different academic schools ($F = 3.427$, $df = 4,84$, $p < 0.05$), with a clear pattern showing Education ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.73$) and Humanities ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.78$) rating effectiveness substantially higher than Natural Sciences ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.83$), Graduate Studies ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.89$), and Engineering ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.92$). This disciplinary variation has important implications for institutional quality management, suggesting that quality assurance mechanisms may be better aligned with social science methodologies and practices than with technical fields. The progressively increasing standard deviations from Education to Engineering indicate greater consensus in social sciences and more diverse opinions in technical disciplines. These differences may reflect discipline-specific challenges in implementing standardized quality processes across fundamentally different academic paradigms. The implications suggest that quality assurance approaches may need to be customized for different academic cultures rather than applied uniformly across the institution, with special attention to technical disciplines where current mechanisms appear less effective and where resistance may be higher due to perceived incompatibility with disciplinary norms.

Table 3: Effectiveness Ratings by Years of Service (ANOVA)

Years of Service	Mean Rating	Standard Deviation	F-value	df	p-value
1-10 years	3.64	0.87	3.841	3,85	0.013*
11-20 years	3.78	0.81			
21-30 years	3.95	0.74			
31+ years	4.12	0.65			

*$p < 0.05$, indicating significant differences

Source: Author (2025)

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Table 4.16 demonstrates a statistically significant relationship between years of service and perceived effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms ($F = 3.841$, $df = 3,85$, $p < 0.05$), revealing a clear positive correlation where effectiveness ratings steadily increase with experience from 1-10 years ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.87$) to 31+ years ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.65$). This experience-based perception gradient has important implications for institutional quality culture development. The consistently decreasing standard deviations with increasing experience suggest greater consensus among long-serving staff, while newer employees show more varied perceptions of effectiveness. This pattern indicates that appreciation for quality systems likely develops through extended engagement rather than immediate recognition of value. The implications are significant for change management strategies: newer staff may require more compelling evidence of effectiveness and targeted support to overcome initial skepticism, while senior staff could be leveraged as quality advocates. Institutions should develop differentiated approaches that address the specific perceptual barriers of newer employees while capitalizing on the positive perspectives of experienced staff to create a more cohesive quality culture across all experience levels.

Furthermore, regression analysis was used. The analyses identify significant predictor variables and their relative importance in explaining variance in quality outcomes. These statistical models provide evidence-based insights regarding which factors most powerfully influence implementation success, enabling the development of targeted improvement strategies that address the most influential determinants of quality assurance effectiveness across the institution.

Table 4: Regression Analysis Predicting Quality Assurance Effectiveness (Model Summary)

Model	**R**	**R-squared**	**Adjusted R-squared**	**Standard Error**	**F**	**Sig.**
1	0.729[a]	0.531	0.503	0.527	18.76	<0.001***
a. Predictors: (Constant), Awareness Level, Training Status, Information Frequency, Position, Years of Service b. Dependent Variable: Quality Assurance Effectiveness						

Source: Author, 2025

Table 4 presents a robust regression model explaining the predictors of quality assurance effectiveness at the University of Zambia. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power with an R-squared value of 0.531, indicating that approximately 53% of variance in quality assurance effectiveness is explained by the five predictor variables. The highly significant F-statistic (18.76, $p<0.001$) confirms the model's overall validity and reliability. These findings have important implications for institutional quality management. The substantial proportion of explained variance suggests that awareness level, training status, information frequency, position, and years of service collectively represent critical determinants of quality assurance effectiveness. University leadership should focus on these key factors when developing quality improvement strategies, particularly enhancing awareness and training programs that address multiple predictors simultaneously. The model provides an empirical foundation for designing targeted interventions to strengthen quality assurance implementation across the institution.

Table 5: Coefficients for Regression Analysis Predicting Quality Assurance Effectiveness

Predictor Variable	**Unstandardized Coefficients**		**Standardized Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
	B	**SE**	**Beta**		
(Constant)	1.752	0.324	-	5.407	<0.001
Awareness Level	0.397	0.086	0.412	4.616	<0.001***
Training Status	0.305	0.113	0.219	2.699	0.008**
Information Frequency	0.143	0.061	0.211	2.344	0.021*
Position	0.137	0.067	0.162	2.045	0.044*
Years of Service	0.084	0.047	0.126	1.787	0.078

Source: Author (2025)

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The study reveals that staff awareness of quality assurance mechanisms strongly predicts implementation effectiveness ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$), yet nearly 40% of staff lack formal training despite their universal willingness to participate in quality development programs. Resource constraints (84.27%), particularly financial limitations (60.67%), represent the most significant barrier to implementation, creating an implementation environment where only 29.21% of staff report high engagement levels. Position significantly influences awareness patterns ($p < 0.01$), with knowledge concentrated among senior administrators (85.7% for deans) but limited among frontline academic staff (36.8% for lecturers). This hierarchical knowledge disparity highlights critical communication breakdowns requiring structural interventions, including decentralized quality officers in schools, expanded training programs, and strengthened information channels.

Qualitative findings from the Administrative staff and Students Association Leaders

The findings indicated that quality assurance mechanisms have positively influenced administrative procedures across the university, though with varying degrees of impact. Key themes include high overall effectiveness ratings (estimated at 90% functionality), systematic implementation of procedures and guidelines, improved clarity in role expectations, standardization of administrative processes, and enhanced documentation practices that guide staff performance across departments. One participant noted the standardization effect:

"*When we have these quality assurance measures, they have influenced us greatly because as a department we are able to implement them and also ensure that there is change in one way or another. We can't just be the same, we have to do what is called continuous change and continuous improvements in everything that we do.*" [Respondent 6]

Another participant highlighted the positive effect on role clarity:

"*It has actually made things easier because everyone is expected to do work. So the policy that is always guiding us, so we know what is expected of each and everyone. It has actually made things easier.*" [Respondent 7]

The implementation of guidelines was also mentioned:

"*It has mainly helped in that we have guidelines which we need to follow so that we follow those standards and we should stick to that and nothing below that.*" [Respondent 2]

One participant noted the impact on organizational legitimacy:

"*It has actually helped us to move away from perception because now we are following what is approved. So, if the quality assurance says here you need to have this standard, so we always follow the principle and standard that is being guided by law.*" [Respondent 7]

The findings revealed several specific improvements in service delivery attributed to quality assurance mechanisms. Key themes include substantial enhancement in academic services (particularly teaching and learning processes), improved examination procedures and standards, better alignment of assessment with learning outcomes, standardization of documentation formats, and increased professionalism in service delivery that has been acknowledged by both staff and students. One participant highlighted improvements in student payment systems:

"*I will give an example like in training, we have been able to monitor the way lecturers teach. Also, we have been able to improve the payment system for students. Previously, the students would queue up, make a long queue to make payments. This time, there are various modules for payments and that way, within a short time, students are able to make payments.*" [Respondent 2]

Another participant noted improvements in safety procedures:

"*Yes, I can mention, I think before that we used to have challenges stalling the fire extinguishers. But right now, I can say I have a clear understanding and at least it has helped me to even make sure that those things*

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are serviced and they are always in good condition to be used at whatever time they are needed." [Respondent 3]

Teaching quality improvements were also mentioned:

"*First of all, the performance management tool. Second, the quality assurance tool. Whereas students have to appraise a lecture at the end of a term, this was just recently implemented by the University of Zambia.*" [Respondent 1]

Program relevance was noted as another improvement:

"*If you look at the higher education, is it 2019 or 2021, it speculates which programs are quite important for the university. And they give you guidelines. So with the introduction of quality assurance, we are able to know which one is relevant and which one is very important.*" [Respondent 7]

The findings demonstrated that quality assurance mechanisms have contributed significantly to standardization of processes across the university. Key themes include development of common formats for academic documents (particularly examination papers), establishment of standard practices for student assessment across departments, uniformity in teaching and administrative procedures, guidelines for results presentation to governance bodies, and systematic verification procedures that ensure consistency in operations. One participant highlighted uniformity in processes:

"*Because of quality assurance, it is sort of a guide to the university and the way we administer every activity. That way, we have uniformity in the way we perform our various activities.*" [Respondent 2]

Another participant provided specific examples:

"*Registration is a standard process for all students. Examination is a standard process for all students. Teaching is also the same.*" [Respondent 2]

The role of shared learning was noted by another participant:

"*And also, we are also able to find out from our friends. How did you do this? If you have managed to do it, and then, oh, okay, this is where I feel that you apply. So, it's easier to know what is taking place, except we are monitored.*" [Respondent 8]

Positive contributions to standardization were also mentioned:

"*I think they have positively contributed to that. In terms of standardizing exams, teaching quality, the quality assurance guidelines have really helped.*" [Respondent 1]

The findings indicated that stakeholder feedback on quality assurance mechanisms has been generally positive, particularly regarding academic standards and graduate employability. Key themes include increased student enrolment attributed to improved standards, positive alumni feedback on the relevance of education to workplace requirements, employer satisfaction with graduate competencies, staff acknowledgment of improved operational clarity, and performance enhancement through systematic student evaluation of teaching. One participant mentioned increased student enrolment:

"*Through the various models, in terms of improvement, we have seen an increase in the number of students. As you know, we are in a competitive market. We have got a number of universities that have come on board. Through various improvements, our numbers have also started increasing.*" [Respondent 2]

Another participant noted feedback in academic contexts:

"*I think the positive feedback and the overall feedback is the adaptation of our programs that were done according to certain standards. Of course, various bodies of the University, sub-Senate committees, actors,*

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offices, start to ensure that we adhere to certain standards and quality when it comes to examinations. I think there is ongoing feedback in those circles." [Respondent 1]

Recognition of programs was highlighted by another participant:

"*Yes, from various stakeholders like in terms of programs we have a lot of students coming to the University of Zambia because our programs are affiliated and it is the duty of the quality assurance unit to ensure that all schools they submit their programs so that they are accredited by the higher learning institute. So, like that our programs are recognized widely.*" [Respondent 3]

Other participants noted staff awareness improvements:

"*Just like I mentioned, this is a school. From the time this was introduced, I think even the lecturers, even ourselves as administrative staff, we know our roles and we even know how we should be performing because at the end of the day we are going to be assessed about our performance and how we do our delivery of work.*" [Respondent 5]

Qualitative findings from Quality Assurance Directorate

The Quality Assurance Directorate reported significant improvements in various areas of university operations attributed to quality assurance mechanisms. Key themes include high overall effectiveness ratings (estimated at 90% functionality), concentration of improvements in academic services (particularly teaching and learning processes), standardization of examination formats and procedures, enhancement of question alignment with learning outcomes, and positive staff acknowledgment of improvements in operational standards.

When asked about the effectiveness of current quality assurance mechanisms, the respondent provided an overall assessment:

"*Well, I think quite effectively. But, of course, not all the procedures and processes that we have put to assure quality are working effectively. But all in all, I would say that, yeah, I would put it that maybe that, yeah, I think 90% of what we have is working.*" [Respondent 1]

Regarding specific areas showing the most improvement, the respondent identified:

"*I think it's the academic services. The academic activities, yes, I think they have been... Teaching and learning, the teaching and learning. I think there has been, yeah, the most improvement as far as I'm concerned, because for instance, just as an example, the examination used to be a bit of a challenge.*" [Respondent 2]

The respondent further highlighted specific feedback from staff:

"*One specific one, I don't know what to call it. Yeah, I was saying that a number of staffs have acknowledged improvements in the way they are doing things. I think one such improvement is with respect to the standard format of examination papers. I think others have said, oh yeah, now that Quality Assurance has done an input, they look like question papers.*" [Respondent 3]

The directorate employs various methods to assess the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms, though some are still in development stages. Key themes include utilization of self-assessment tools (particularly for administrative services), implementation of comparative analysis methods (examining conditions before and after interventions), reliance on multi-stakeholder feedback (especially from students and academic staff), development of service charters, and the planned implementation of perception surveys to gauge service efficacy. When explaining the assessment tools used by the directorate, the respondent described:

"*Tools, these are instruments through which we can collect information. Like in this case, for the efficiency of administrative services, as you put them. We have a self-assessment tool. So through that tool, meaning the recipients, firstly, it's the people that are offering that service to assess themselves, whether they're doing it efficiently or not. But that will also involve the recipients of those services.*" [Respondent 1]

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Regarding evidence collection methods, the respondent elaborated:

"*Well, we do surveys through the various recipients of our services. So, for instance, we do carry out audits. So, when we collect the information, we look at the information before and after. I mean, so that gives us some, it gives us evidence as to how, whether things are actually changing or not, yes. So, we do that, yeah. And as I said, a lot of the tools are there, yes.*" [Respondent 3]

The respondent further explained their approach to gathering feedback:

"*Well, the methods that we use, it's feedback from, for instance, the users of these services. Like in this case, who are the users of the teaching and learning? It's the students. So, we interact with the students and also with the staff themselves. So, through the Senate committees, they'll give you feedback to say, oh no, I think here, this is positive.*" [Respondent 2]

The Quality Assurance Directorate is guided by international standards and best practices in its operations. Key themes include extensive global networking (participation in international quality assurance communities), collaborative partnerships with specialized organizations (Commonwealth of Learning, Southern African Regional Association of Universities), benchmarking against international databases (Association of Commonwealth Universities), participation in knowledge-sharing platforms (regional conferences and workshops), and adaptation of global frameworks to local contexts (employability skills framework).

On the question of how international standards guide their work, the respondent emphasized:

"*Well, in a number of ways, we are not an island. The world now is one village, so to say... So, we are connected to a number of partners that help us in this thing that we are also moving with the global trends. We have the Commonwealth of Learning.*" [Respondent 2]

The respondent further detailed their global networking efforts:

"*So, we are also in touch with the organizations that spearheading more or less quality assurance globally. For instance, we do get calls to share our experiences through, one of them is the Southern African Association, SRAO, Southern African Regional Association of Universities.*" [Respondent 1]

Regarding benchmarking practices, the respondent explained:

"*The other one is the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). So, we have a database which we can benchmark our activities against what is in that database, what other universities are doing, where the other universities are... Other than that, yeah, we also participate in the national and regional conferences.*" [Respondent 3].

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The research revealed considerable variation in staff perceptions regarding the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms across different functional areas at the University of Zambia. Student assessment emerged as the domain where quality assurance demonstrates highest perceived effectiveness (mean = 1.92), with 47.19% of respondents rating these mechanisms as "very effective." This finding parallels Mgaiwa and Ishengoma's (2022) research, which identified assessment systems as frequently receiving greater institutional attention than other quality domains. The emphasis on assessment aligns with traditional academic priorities and external accountability requirements, creating incentives for focused implementation in this area.

Administrative processes followed closely in perceived effectiveness (mean = 2.08), suggesting that non-academic quality systems function reasonably well despite receiving less attention in broader quality discussions. This finding contrasts with Kajala and Daka's (2023) observation of administrative challenges in Zambian private universities, indicating that public universities may have developed stronger administrative quality practices than its private counterparts. The University's status as an established public institution likely

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provides structural advantages for administrative standardization compared to newer private institutions operating with limited resources and experience.

Teaching quality mechanisms demonstrated middling effectiveness ratings (mean = 2.16), with 39.33% of staff rating them as neutral or less effective. This finding raises questions about core educational functions, especially considering that 60.67% rated such mechanisms positively. The perception gap reflects Nguyen's (2021) observation that teaching quality assessment often generates divided opinions among academic staff. The moderate effectiveness rating for teaching quality mechanisms suggests partial implementation success, with substantial room for improvement in this fundamental educational function.

Curriculum development received the lowest effectiveness ratings (mean = 2.31), with 47.19% of respondents rating these mechanisms as neutral or less effective. This finding aligns with Njihia's (2022) research identifying curriculum review as a particularly challenging quality assurance domain in East African universities. The effectiveness deficit in curriculum development may reflect the complexity of balancing multiple stakeholder interests in program design, as noted by Ekpoh (2020) in research on Nigerian universities. The finding suggests this Public University's curriculum development practices may not adequately incorporate stakeholder input or systematic review processes.

Statistical analysis revealed significant differences in effectiveness perceptions across staff positions ($F = 5.172$, $df = 2,86$, $p < 0.01$), with deans reporting highest effectiveness ($M = 4.21$), followed by HODs ($M = 3.95$) and lecturers ($M = 3.62$). This hierarchical perception pattern indicates potential disconnection between those who design quality systems and those who implement them daily. The finding supports Davis's (2017) research on managerialism in quality assurance, which identified tensions between administrative perspectives and frontline academic experiences. This perception gap creates risk for misaligned improvement strategies that may not address implementation realities experienced by frontline staff.

Disciplinary variations in effectiveness perceptions emerged as significant ($F = 3.427$, $df = 4,84$, $p < 0.05$), with Education ($M = 4.06$) and Humanities ($M = 3.98$) rating effectiveness substantially higher than Natural Sciences ($M = 3.77$), Graduate Studies ($M = 3.66$), and Engineering ($M = 3.56$). This pattern suggests that quality assurance approaches may better align with social science methodologies than technical disciplines. The finding parallels Amoako and Asamoah-Gyimah's (2020) research showing disciplinary differences in quality perception, while extending their work by identifying specific patterns across disciplinary boundaries. This variation holds implications for developing discipline-sensitive quality approaches rather than uniform systems across diverse academic paradigms.

Experience emerged as a significant factor in effectiveness perception ($F = 3.841$, $df = 3,85$, $p < 0.013$), with ratings steadily increasing from newer staff ($M = 3.64$) to most experienced ($M = 4.12$). This pattern suggests that appreciation for quality systems develops through extended engagement rather than immediate recognition of value. The correlation between experience and positive perception supports Ibrahim's (2021) finding that quality assurance appreciation typically develops gradually among academic staff. The implication points toward need for targeted support for newer employees who may not immediately recognize benefits of quality systems.

Interviews with administrative staff revealed specific improvements attributed to quality assurance mechanisms. One participant noted enhancements in student services: "Previously, the students would queue up, make a long queue to make payments. This time, there are various modules for payments and that way, within a short time, students are able to make payments." Another highlighted teaching quality improvements through "the performance management tool... the quality assurance tool. Whereas students have to appraise a lecture at the end of a term." These operational improvements align with Khdair's (2022) research demonstrating positive correlation between quality assurance implementation and performance metrics. The specific examples provide concrete evidence of quality mechanisms generating operational enhancements.

The Quality Assurance Directorate estimated that "90% of what we have is working," though acknowledging variations across functions. The directorate identified academic activities, particularly "teaching and learning," as areas showing greatest improvement. This assessment partially aligns with quantitative findings, though

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staff ratings suggest lower overall effectiveness than the directorate's estimate. This perception gap between quality administrators and general staff reflects Stensaker et al.'s (2011) observation that quality assurance professionals often perceive greater implementation success than other university stakeholders. The difference highlights need for more systematic feedback collection to accurately assess implementation effectiveness.

Regression analysis identified awareness level ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$) as the strongest predictor of perceived effectiveness, followed by training status ($\beta = 0.219$, $p = 0.008$) and information frequency ($\beta = 0.211$, $p = 0.021$). This finding demonstrates that knowledge-related factors exert greater influence on effectiveness perception than structural variables. The predictive relationship supports Cardoso et al.'s (2015) conclusion that staff understanding significantly influences implementation success. The data provides empirical validation for focusing on knowledge development as a primary strategy for enhancing quality assurance effectiveness.

Correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships between awareness levels and effectiveness across all quality domains: teaching quality ($r = 0.623$, $p < 0.001$), administrative processes ($r = 0.587$, $p < 0.001$), curriculum development ($r = 0.549$, $p < 0.001$), and student assessment ($r = 0.535$, $p < 0.001$). These consistent correlations indicate that knowledge enhancement represents a powerful cross-cutting strategy for improving effectiveness perceptions. The finding extends Ekpoh's (2020) research by establishing awareness not merely as a prerequisite for implementation but as a direct predictor of perceived effectiveness across multiple quality domains.

When examined through Total Quality Management Theory, the findings demonstrate both alignment and deviation from TQM principles. The emphasis on student assessment aligns with TQM's customer focus principle, as assessment directly impacts student experiences. However, the moderate ratings for teaching quality and curriculum development suggest incomplete application of TQM's continuous improvement principle to core educational functions. As Sutanto et al. (2018) noted, comprehensive TQM implementation requires systematic application across all organizational processes, not selective implementation in easily measured domains.

The effectiveness variations across staff positions reflect limitations in stakeholder engagement as conceptualized by Stakeholder Theory. Freeman's (1984) model emphasizes balanced consideration of all stakeholder perspectives, yet the hierarchical perception pattern indicates greater alignment with administrative viewpoints than frontline implementers. This imbalance supports Chizyuka and Daka’s (2021) observation that quality assurance systems often prioritize managerial stakeholders over operational staff. The perception gap suggests need for more inclusive quality development approaches that incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives from design through implementation.

Institutional Theory provides additional interpretive framework for understanding effectiveness variations. Mpelo and Daka’s (2024) concept of ceremonial conformity may explain why certain quality mechanisms (particularly in curriculum development) receive lower effectiveness ratings despite formal implementation. The theory suggests organizations sometimes adopt structures primarily for legitimacy rather than operational improvement.

Administrative staff reported substantial improvements in standardization through quality assurance: "Because of quality assurance, it is sort of a guide to the university and the way we administer every activity. That way, we have uniformity in the way we perform our various activities. These observations support Daka's (2023) finding that standardization represents a primary benefit of quality assurance implementation. The standardization emphasis aligns with TQM principles regarding process consistency and variability reduction.

Positive stakeholder feedback emerged as a theme from administrative interviews: "We have seen an increase in the number of students... Through various improvements, our numbers have also started increasing." Another noted program recognition benefits: "Our programs are affiliated and it is the duty of the quality assurance unit to ensure that all schools they submit their programs so that they are accredited by the higher learning institute. So, like that our programs are recognized widely." These outcomes align with Shams's (2017) stakeholder-centered quality management model, which emphasizes external recognition as a key

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benefit of effective quality systems. The reported enrollment increases and program recognition provide tangible evidence of quality assurance generating institutional benefits.

The Quality Assurance Directorate reported using various methods to assess effectiveness, including "self-assessment tools" and comparative analysis looking at the information before and after. However, the directorate acknowledged limitations in systematic assessment. This partial implementation of assessment systems reflects Karimi's (2014) observation that higher education institutions often establish quality frameworks without fully operationalizing measurement systems. The limited assessment infrastructure may explain why effectiveness perceptions vary considerably across staff categories and departments.

The directorate reported engagement with international quality standards through connections with "the Commonwealth of Learning" and "the Southern African Regional Association of Universities." This external benchmarking aligns with Mushumba et al.'s (2024) findings regarding regulatory influence on Zambian higher education quality. The international networking provides potential pathways for enhancing quality practices through comparative learning, yet the variable effectiveness ratings suggest incomplete translation of external standards into consistent internal practices.

When considering effectiveness through regression modeling, the five-predictor model explained 53.1% of variance in effectiveness perceptions ($R^2 = 0.531$, $p < 0.001$). This substantial explanatory power indicates that awareness, training, information frequency, position, and experience collectively represent major determinants of how staff perceive quality assurance effectiveness. The model provides empirical validation for multifaceted improvement strategies addressing multiple predictors simultaneously rather than focusing on single factors. The finding extends Nguyen et al.'s (2021) research by quantifying relative importance of various factors affecting quality assurance implementation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study also revealed that the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms varied significantly across different institutional functions. Teaching-related quality assurance processes were more widely recognized and perceived as more effective than those related to research and administrative procedures. This imbalance pointed to an implementation framework that prioritized certain aspects of institutional quality while leaving others underdeveloped. Additionally, disciplinary variations in perceptions of effectiveness suggested that a standardized approach to quality assurance might not be suitable for all academic units. Instead, the study indicated that customized strategies tailored to specific disciplinary cultures and practices could enhance overall effectiveness.

Moreover, the study highlighted the need for a more holistic and integrated approach to quality assurance at the University of Zambia. Addressing structural knowledge gaps and fostering better communication between policy designers and implementers would be essential in bridging the perception gap. Training programs should be systematically embedded into the university’s quality assurance framework to ensure that all staff, regardless of their role or academic discipline, have a clear understanding of expectations and best practices. Furthermore, resource allocation strategies should prioritize areas where improved awareness and engagement can yield the highest institutional impact, ensuring a balanced and effective quality assurance system.

In conclusion, the study’s findings highlighted that improving quality assurance effectiveness at the University of Zambia requires a twofold approach: reducing hierarchical knowledge disparities through targeted training and communication and addressing resource constraints through strategic prioritization.

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

1. The University of Zambia management should actively involve academic and administrative staff in the design and review of quality assurance mechanisms.
2. The university should establish more robust channels for staff to provide feedback on the quality assurance processes.
3. The University of Zambia management should incorporate student feedback more systematically into quality assurance processes.

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