



Governing for sustainability: A contextual framework linking governance, autonomy, accountability and financial sustainability in Zambia's public higher education system

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ABSTRACT

Public higher education systems across Africa have increasingly adopted privatisation-related reforms to improve financial sustainability, efficiency and institutional performance. However, in Zambia, privatisation implementation remains fragmented and contested within a highly regulated governance environment. This study examines how governance structures, accountability mechanisms, institutional autonomy and financial sustainability interact within Zambia's public higher education system. The study aimed to examine how governance structures influence institutional management, analyse how accountability requirements shape financial decision-making, explore how autonomy is negotiated within statutory and ministerial controls and develop a contextually grounded framework that integrates governance, autonomy, accountability and sustainability. This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. Between 8th February 2024 and 30th January 2025, data was collected from three public universities in Zambia: The University of Zambia, Copperbelt University and Mulungushi University. Eleven participants, comprising council members, senior administrators, the finance office department, the department of student affairs and government officials, were purposively selected. Semi-structured interviews were complemented by documentary analysis of the Higher Education Act (2013), Public Financial Management Act (2018), institutional statutes, financial reports and audit documents. Data were analysed using Manual Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings show that Zambia's public universities operate under restricted autonomy, characterised by extensive ministerial influence over financial decisions, senior appointments and resource allocation. While institutions attempt to diversify income through tuition, short courses, partnerships and ventures, government grants remain the dominant source of funding. Financial records indicate persistent budget deficits, delayed government disbursements and constrained recruitment processes. Regulatory density, policy fragmentation and overlapping statutory requirements limit institutional discretion and slow strategic decision-making. Although internal governance mechanisms promote accountability, they frequently reinforce compliance rather than innovation. Based on these findings, the study developed the Regulated Autonomy and Transformative University Sustainability (RATUS) Framework. This contextually grounded model explains how the interaction between regulation, autonomy, accountability and sustainability can create a balanced pathway for improving institutional performance. The study recommends legislative clarification of decision authority, coordinated policy alignment across regulatory bodies, strengthened institutional financial capacity and the adoption of integrated governance and planning models to enhance long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Accountability, Autonomy, Financial Sustainability, Governance, Public Universities, Zambia

I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, higher education systems are under increasing pressure to improve performance, enhance efficiency and respond to financial constraints. Across many countries, these pressures have produced reforms influenced by New Public Management (NPM), market-oriented governance and cost-sharing arrangements (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Expanding student enrolments alongside declining public funding have accelerated these reforms, compelling universities to adopt managerial practices traditionally associated with the private sector.

In Africa, similar patterns have emerged. Countries such as Kenya, Ghana, South Africa and Uganda have introduced reforms that encourage income diversification, strengthen governance structures and increase institutional responsibility for resource management (Teferra, 2019; Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Saint et al., 2003). These continental reform dynamics are also evident in Zambia, though shaped by important contextual distinctions. Public universities established in the 1990s were conceived as instruments of national development and were largely state-funded. Despite subsequent reforms promoting cost-sharing, income generation and institutional expansion, these universities remain heavily dependent on government funding and supervision (Masaiti & Simuyaba, 2018).

Although universities are formally positioned as autonomous entities, the Higher Education Act (2013) subjects major decisions, including senior appointments, financial commitments and fee adjustments, to ministerial approval. This creates a governance arrangement characterised by formal autonomy but substantive state control. De Boer et al. (2007) conceptualise this configuration as “regulated autonomy,” in which institutions are granted decision-making authority while remaining embedded in multi-level accountability and control systems. Similarly, Cloete et al (2015) observe that African universities operate under contradictory pressures: they are expected to expand knowledge production and contribute to development while functioning within constrained governance and funding environments.

In Zambia, this tension is reinforced by fiscal pressures. The World Bank (2021) Public Expenditure Review highlights structural funding constraints, delayed disbursements and broader inefficiencies across human development sectors, conditions that indirectly affect university sustainability. While institutions are encouraged to pursue innovation and revenue diversification, regulatory controls continue to limit their discretionary capacity (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). University councils may lead institutional processes, but final authority over key strategic decisions remains with the state (Government of Zambia, 2013).

These intersecting dynamics, fiscal constraint, regulated autonomy and reform-driven expectations reveal a governance environment that is complex and internally contradictory. Although multiple reforms have been introduced, public universities continue to experience financial deficits, delayed funding, recruitment constraints and uneven implementation of income-generating initiatives. Understanding these challenges requires an integrated analysis that connects governance structures, institutional autonomy, accountability mechanisms and financial sustainability. In this context, this study develops the Regulated Autonomy for Transformative University Sustainability (RATUS) Framework. This contextually grounded model explains how these relational dynamics shape institutional performance in Zambia’s public universities.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although the Zambian education system has introduced several reforms aimed at strengthening the governance of public universities, these institutions continue to face financial instability, recruitment challenges and constrained autonomy. The Higher Education Act (2013) establishes autonomous university councils; however, it subjects key decisions, including fee adjustments, senior appointments and major financial commitments, to ministerial approval. This arrangement has produced a governance environment characterised by partial autonomy, regulatory fragmentation and restricted institutional discretion.

Within such contexts, cost-sharing reforms become significant. Johnstone (2004) explains that cost-sharing policies shift part of the financial burden of higher education from the state to students and families, often as a response to fiscal pressures. While such reforms can generate additional revenue for institutions, they also introduce political sensitivities and equity concerns, particularly in systems where public funding remains limited.

Studies focusing on Zambia and the broader African context have examined cost-sharing, income generation and governance reforms (Cloete et al., 2015). However, these analyses do not fully integrate governance structures, autonomy constraints, accountability mechanisms and financial sustainability into a unified explanatory framework. There remains a need for a model that explains how these elements function relationally within Zambia’s policy environment. This study addresses that gap by developing the Regulated Autonomy for Transformative University Sustainability (RATUS) Framework. This contextually grounded model clarifies how governance, autonomy, accountability and sustainability interact to shape institutional performance.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To examine how governance structures influence institutional management in public universities.
- ii. To analyse how accountability requirements shape financial decisions.
- iii. To explore how autonomy is negotiated in the presence of statutory and ministerial controls.
- iv. To assess how these factors collectively influence financial sustainability.
- v. To develop a framework that integrates governance, autonomy, accountability and sustainability.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 New Public Management (NPM)

New Public Management provides a useful perspective for understanding contemporary reforms in higher education governance. At its core, NPM promotes efficiency, accountability, performance measurement and greater decentralisation in decision-making. It also encourages public institutions to adopt selected management practices associated with the private sector. In university environments, these ideas have influenced changes such as cost-sharing, performance-based contracts and efforts to diversify revenue sources beyond government funding (Merriam & Tisdell,



2016). In this study, NPM helps explain the growing expectation that universities should operate in a more financially disciplined and results-oriented manner while still fulfilling their public mandate.

2.1.2 Sustainability Theory

Sustainability theory emerged from broader discussion on sustainable development in the late twentieth century, particularly following the Brundtland Commission Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which defined sustainability as meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In the context of higher education, the theory was further developed by scholars such as Jamil Salmi (2009) and Michael Shattock (2010), who applied sustainability principles specifically to university governance and financing.

Salmi (2009) emphasised that long-term institutional success depends on diversified and stable funding sources, effective governance and strategic planning capacity. Similarly, Shattock (2010) argued that sustainable universities require sound financial management, institutional autonomy and adaptable leadership structures that can respond to changing economic and policy environments. These scholars advanced sustainability thinking within higher education by linking financial stability, governance flexibility and long-term institutional viability.

This position is reinforced by Shattock (2013), who links institutional sustainability to adaptive governance structures and strategic financial management within complex regulatory environments.

Sustainability theory therefore, focuses on the capacity of institutions to operate effectively over time while adjusting to shifting financial, political and policy conditions. It stresses the importance of stable income streams, responsible resource use and governance systems that are flexible enough to respond to external pressures. When these elements are combined, universities are better positioned to maintain continuity, plan strategically and support future development.

This theory is particularly relevant to the present study because it provides a framework for assessing whether current governance arrangements in Zambia enable long-term institutional viability or instead, constrain financial stability and sustainable growth.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Governance and Autonomy in African Higher Education

Cross Africa, many higher education reforms have aimed to give universities greater autonomy to manage their own affairs while making sure they remain accountable to the state. In countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria, universities are formally granted autonomy through their councils and senior management structures (Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Saint, et al 2003). On paper, this suggests that institutions have the authority to govern themselves.

However, research shows that governments continue to play an important role in areas such as approving budgets, appointing senior leaders and guiding policy direction (De Boer et al., 2007; Christensen & Lægheid, 2011; Marginson, 2011). This means that although universities are described as independent, they still operate under close government supervision.

This continued state involvement is closely linked to funding. Because public universities depend heavily on government support, they must comply with strict accountability rules set by ministries and other regulatory bodies (Cloete et al., 2015; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). These rules are designed to protect public resources, but they also limit the extent to which universities can independently make financial decisions, such as reallocating budgets or adjusting fees. As a result, autonomy in African higher education is not complete freedom; rather, it is negotiated within juridical and political boundaries. These governance arrangements also affect financial sustainability, as institutions cannot easily launch new income strategies or implement major reforms without government approval. This consistent pattern of formal autonomy, combined with ongoing state regulation, points to the need for a framework that clearly explains how governance, accountability, autonomy and sustainability interact inside regulated public university systems.

2.2.2 Accountability and Financial Regulation

Public universities operate within environments that are regulated and designed to promote responsible financial management. In Zambia, instruments such as the Public Financial Management Act (2018) and the Public Procurement Act (2020) establish clear expectations regarding budgeting, auditing and procurement processes. These frameworks play an important role in strengthening transparency and reinforcing public trust (Bovens, 2007).

Yet regulation can present unintended consequences. When compliance requirements become overly procedural, institutional responsiveness may be weakened (Materu, 2007; Teferra, 2017; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Christensen & Lægheid, 2011). Caution that regulatory frameworks can become counterproductive when overly restrictive and allow little room for institutions to exercise their own judgment. In such situations, universities may struggle to be innovative and often rely heavily on central government approval for important strategic decisions. The

issue is therefore not regulation, but whether it provides universities with enough operational freedom to develop and sustain viable financial strategies.

2.2.3 Privatisation, Market Orientation and Income Diversification

Several African studies show that privatisation-related reforms often emerge indirectly through income generation, postgraduate programmes, fee-paying enrolments and strategic partnerships (Teferra, 2019; Johnstone, 2004; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Despite these efforts, many institutions struggle to turn entrepreneurial initiatives into stable, predictable revenue streams. The success of such initiatives is frequently constrained by limited commercial expertise, weak feasibility planning and restrictive regulatory environments (Materu, 2007).

Zambia reflects similar patterns. Public universities have invested in income-generating activities such as agricultural projects, guest houses, consultancy services and short professional courses; however, sustaining consistent financial returns remains difficult. While these initiatives demonstrate awareness of the need for revenue diversification, their impact has generally been modest due to their small scale and uneven implementation (Saint et al., 2003). Masaiti and Simuyaba (2018) further document the financing challenges facing Zambia's public universities, highlighting continued dependence on government grants, delayed funding and limited diversification capacity. They argue that although income-generating initiatives exist, structural funding constraints persist and continue to undermine long-term financial sustainability.

These conditions raise important questions about whether existing governance arrangements sufficiently support entrepreneurial activity capable of strengthening institutional resilience and long-term financial stability.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design grounded in interpretivism to explore how governance, autonomy and financial sustainability are understood and practised within Zambia's public universities. An interpretivist approach permitted examination of the meanings institutional actors attach to their experiences in a regulated higher education environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The three universities were the University of Zambia, the Copperbelt University and Mulungushi University, which were purposively selected to provide contrasting institutional contexts based on differences in governance structures, historical development and funding arrangements. The study population comprised senior decision-makers involved in governance and financial management, including council members, senior administrators, student affairs representatives and government officials from the Ministry of Education and the Higher Education Authority. Participants were selected using criterion-based selection and expert judgment to ensure direct experience in institutional leadership. Eleven participants were interviewed, and data collection concluded at saturation, consistent with established qualitative research guidance (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a review of key documents, including the Higher Education Act (2013), the Public Financial Management Act (2018), the Public Procurement Act (2020), as well as institutional statutes, strategic plans, audit reports and financial statements. Interviews followed a flexible guide that allowed participants to elaborate upon governance arrangements, accountability practices, autonomy, financial decision-making and resource constraints. Documentary evidence was used to corroborate and contextualise interview data.

Data analysis followed thematic procedures informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), involving repeated reading of transcripts, inductive coding, clustering of related ideas and development of themes (Smith, et al 2009). The analysis incorporated constant comparison to enhance analytical coherence and depth. Where relevant, thematic analysis procedures were aligned with established methodological guidance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The participant profile reflected proportional representation across institutional leadership, financial governance, academic management and state control.

The study is positioned within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meaning emerges from lived experience within specific institutional contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Consistent with this position, an interpretative design informed by IPA was adopted to examine how stakeholders experience and interpret governance reform and financial sustainability in Zambia's public universities (Smith et al., 2009). These issues are shaped by negotiation, regulation and institutional practice rather than purely technical or financial considerations.

A quantitative design would have prioritised measurement over meaning and potentially overlooked contextual influences on decision-making (Maxwell, 2013). The qualitative interpretative approach therefore enabled in-depth exploration of how autonomy, regulation and sustainability are enacted in practice, while supporting the development of the RATUS framework through ongoing engagement with participant narratives. This alignment between the



paradigm and the design ensured coherence among the study’s philosophical foundations, research aims and analytical outcomes.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in three public universities in Zambia which are the University of Zambia, the Copperbelt University and Mulungushi University. These institutions were selected because they are the oldest and play a central role in the national higher education system and are directly affected by governance and financial reforms.

3.3 Target Population

The target population included senior university leaders and policy actors involved in governance and financial decision-making.

3.4 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

Criterion-based purposive sampling was used to select participants who met specific requirements relevant to the study. Participants were chosen based on their direct involvement in university governance, financial management and higher education policy. A total of eleven participants were interviewed. Data saturation was reached when similar themes began to repeat across interviews.

To ensure confidentiality and compliance with scholarly ethical standards, participants are identified using anonymised codes (CA1-UB3). Each code corresponds to a participant’s institutional role and interview date. Direct quotations are presented verbatim and enclosed in quotation marks.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis and non-participant observation. These methods helped capture lived experiences while also provided policy and institutional context.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Manual Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Themes were developed inductively from the data, leading to the development of the RATUS Framework.

The researcher remained reflexively aware of the positionality within Zambia’s higher education context. To minimise interpretive bias, repeatedly reviewed the transcripts, compared codes across interviews and used documentary evidence to corroborate participants’ accounts.

3.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of interviews and documentary evidence, systematic coding and verification of themes across participants. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, while dependability was enhanced through systematic documentation of analytic procedures.

Table 1

Profile of Study Participants by Institution, Gender and Key Responsibilities

Category	Institution	Male	Female	Total	Key Responsibilities
CA1	CBU	1	0	1	Strategic leadership, policy advocacy, institutional vision
MC2	Mulungushi	1	0	1	Governance, administration, regulatory compliance
CA2	CBU	1	0	1	Governance, administration, regulatory compliance
UB4	UNZA	1	0	1	Academic leadership, resource allocation, faculty control
CA4	CBU	1	0	1	Academic leadership, resource allocation, faculty control
MC4	Mulungushi	1	0	1	Academic leadership, resource allocation, faculty control
UB3	UNZA	1	0	1	Budgeting, financial management, audits, revenue diversification
CA3	CBU	0	1	1	Budgeting, financial management, audits, revenue diversification
MC3	Mulungushi	1	0	1	Budgeting, financial management, audits, revenue diversification
MOED1	Directorate of Education	0	1	1	Policy development, oversight of university funding, regulation
HEAD1	HEA	1	0	1	Policy development, oversight of university funding, regulation
Total		9	2	11	



IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

Direct quotations are presented verbatim to preserve participant voice, while interpretations reflect patterns identified through thematic analysis. Participant codes (CA1–UB3) indicate anonymised participants across institutional leadership and policy roles.

The findings are drawn from interviews with senior university leaders and government officials, complemented by an extensive review of policy documents, statutes, financial reports and audit records. Through thematic analysis, fifteen themes emerged and were grouped into three analytical clusters. The presentation below integrates Themes 1-15 to provide a coherent account of how governance, accountability, autonomy and financial pressures shape institutional actions in Zambia's public universities.

Cluster 1: Views and Selective Use of Privatisation (Themes 1–5)

Theme 1: Understanding Privatisation in Public Higher Education: Participants consistently indicated that privatisation is not formally adopted as national policy but appears selectively in practice. However, elements of it can still be seen in certain practices, such as income-generating activities and partnerships. Many administrators stressed that universities remain public institutions, guided by statutes that emphasise the state's responsibility. Documentary evidence supported this view, showing that major legislation, including the Higher Education Act, does not mandate privatisation. This has created a situation in which universities cautiously adopt revenue-enhancing activities while continuing to operate under strong ministerial authority.

Theme 2: A Careful and Selective Approach to Market-Oriented Practices: The participants explained that income-generating initiatives were carried out carefully and only within the boundaries set by national law. The universities introduced ventures that can be added to the revenue-generating activities, such as consultancy, short courses and postgraduate programmes, but still seek ministerial approval before the programmes are implemented. Although policy documents encourage institutions to diversify their income streams, they also emphasise that higher education should remain a public good. This dual direction created a cautious environment in which institutions pursued new initiatives while remaining mindful of regulatory boundaries.

Theme 3: Managing Finances Strategically to Maintain Stability: Financial management was seen as a key part of how universities operate. Participants highlighted the importance of careful budgeting, close monitoring of spending and adherence to legal reporting requirements to keep institutions stable. Although these controls safeguarded accountability, they often slowed financial decision-making. Several administrators said that even simple activities required lengthy approval processes, reducing the university's flexibility. Institutional financial reports confirmed reliance on annual budgets shaped by ministry guidelines, with little room for independent financial strategy. Universities tried to improve internal operations, but their efforts were limited because they lacked full independence.

Theme 4: Legal Structures and Limited Independence: The study found that governance structures are strongly based on national laws. Although university councils are officially responsible for running the institutions, they still need ministry approval for major decisions. Participants explained that councils manage everyday operations, but key matters such as appointing senior staff, adjusting fees and committing to large financial expenses must first be approved by the government. Analysis of institutional statutes revealed close alignment with national legislation, with limited space for context-specific governance approaches. This arrangement created stability but also delayed important actions.

Theme 5: Structured Governance and Partial Decentralisation in Recruitment: Recruitment processes revealed both internal participation and external control. The universities had the mandate to take care of matters that required human resources and the senior positions were left to the government to approve. Many of the people interviewed said that these long approval processes made it hard to attract and keep highly qualified staff. Salaries were also standardised across public institutions, which meant universities had little flexibility to offer better pay to stand out. Although the university councils had the mandate to hire, internal documents showed that the universities still needed the government to make the final decisions.

Theme 6: Limited Strategic Use of Recruitment and Human Resource Sustainability: This theme shows that recruitment in Zambia's public universities is mainly treated as a routine administrative process focused on rules and approvals rather than as a strategic approach to building skills, strengthening academic programmes or supporting long-term institutional goals. Hiring depends on available funding, ministerial approval and wage limits rather than long-term academic or institutional needs. As one administrator explained, "Recruitment is not something we plan strategically. You wait for authority" (P6, CA2, 2nd October 2024 at 09:28hrs). This has led to long-standing vacancies, especially in specialised positions, which increase workloads, lower staff morale and weaken teaching and research. CA1 noted that "Some positions stay vacant for two or three years" (P4, CA1, 3rd October 2024 at 8:52 hrs)." Audit reports referring to "frozen positions" confirm that recruitment is treated mainly as cost control, limiting institutional capacity and long-term sustainability.



Cluster 2: Institutional Leadership, Financial Constraints and Accountability (Themes 7-10)

Theme 7: Universities' continuous dependence on Government Funding Limited Diversification

Universities have the responsibility to raise funding to remain sustainable. Still, all institutions depend on the government for funding, which covers part of their operating costs. Participants explained that tuition fees were the main additional source of income, while other income-generating activities brought in relatively little. Projects such as agricultural ventures, rental properties and consultancy services often faced planning difficulties and strict approval requirements. Although policy documents encouraged universities to diversify their income, they did not provide clear guidance on how to do so effectively.

Theme 8: Budget Deficits and Financial Planning Constraints: All universities reported persistent fiscal pressure characterised by structural deficits and uncertainty in grant disbursement. Participants indicated that institutional budgets are formulated around projected government allocations, yet actual releases are frequently delayed or reduced. When shortfalls occur, universities adjust by suspending projects, deferring maintenance and reallocating operational funds. Documentary analysis of financial statements confirmed patterns of unpaid obligations, stalled infrastructure development and recurring expenditure backlogs. These conditions shift institutional focus from strategic planning to immediate financial survival, thereby constraining long-term sustainability.

A related constraint concerns tuition regulation. Universities do not possess full authority to determine fee levels independently, as adjustments require ministerial approval. Participants explained that approval processes often extend over long periods, during which inflation and rising operational costs erode the real value of proposed fees. Consequently, even approved adjustments rarely reflect actual expenditure demands. Although some institutions attempt differential pricing for cost-intensive programmes, implementation remains uneven and subject to regulatory scrutiny. Audit reports further revealed inconsistencies in cost-calculation models and identified transparency weaknesses in fee-setting processes. This regulatory arrangement reinforces the ongoing tension between financial viability and the obligation to preserve equitable access to higher education.

Theme 9: Political Regulation of Tuition and Equity Pressures: Tuition-setting processes reflect broader political sensitivities surrounding public access to higher education. Participants explained that fee adjustments are not treated solely as financial decisions but as socially and politically consequential actions. Because universities operate within a publicly funded system, proposed fee increases are subject to ministerial scrutiny to ensure affordability considerations are maintained. This political control reflects the state's role in safeguarding equitable access, but it also restricts institutional flexibility. Administrators noted that tuition discussions often prioritise social stability over full cost recovery, reinforcing the perception that universities function within a tightly supervised public framework rather than as financially autonomous entities. This dynamic reveals the broader governance tension between institutional sustainability and public accountability.

Theme 10: Rules and Practical Ways of Managing Finances: Even though their independence was limited, universities made small changes to improve internal management. They introduced tighter spending controls, focused on essential activities and developed a few small partnerships to help manage financial pressures. However, approval requirements for procurement and project initiation slowed progress. Documentary analysis confirmed compliance with financial rules but limited evidence of strategic financial growth.

Cluster 3: Systemic Reform, Partnerships and Long-Term Sustainability (Themes 11–15)

Theme 11: Governance Frameworks and Conditional Autonomy: Universities demonstrated a mix of internal authority and external control. Councils and senates handled institutional processes, but major decisions required ministerial consent. This structure offered accountability but reduced speed and innovation. Many participants noted a mismatch between institutional expectations and the authority granted to them. Internal statutes often repeat national laws rather than addressing the institution's specific needs.

Theme 12: Policy Fragmentation, Regulatory Density and Financial Transparency: this theme highlights how overlapping and sometimes conflicting rules make governance and financial management difficult. Universities are expected to be creative and flexible, but they must also follow strict public-sector rules. As CA1 explained, “*One law tells us to be flexible and entrepreneurial, another tells us to follow strict public sector procedures*” CA1, Interview, 3rd October 2024 8:52hrs). This contradiction creates confusion and slows decision-making because administrators worry about being questioned during audits. As a result, people hesitate because they are not sure which rule will be applied during an audit. Reporting is often delayed; communication is limited and financial information is not clearly shared.

The system compels universities to act cautiously and defensively, discouraging openness and coordinated decision-making, making governance less clear and less coordinated.

Theme 13: Legal Governance Structures and Financial Constraints: University governance arrangements kept institutions closely aligned with public-sector financial regulations. While these rules helped prevent mismanagement, they also limited innovation, reduced procurement flexibility and slowed project implementation. Institutions found it difficult to introduce income-generating activities because the approval processes took too long.



Theme 14: Working Together Through Partnerships and Shared Leadership: Despite these challenges, universities continued to build partnerships with external organisations, particularly in ICT, student housing and short courses. Participants explained that for these partnerships to succeed, they needed proper planning and close monitoring. Institutional strategic plans showed a growing interest in collaboration, although most of these projects were still in their early stages.

Theme 15: Dependence on Student Financial Aid and Cash Flow Problems: The universities have their major source of income from the state student loan scheme and it has remained the major source of income. However, delays in the release of funds and poor repayment processes led to uncertainty. Many students were unable to access financial support, which led to lower enrolment in some programmes. Recommendations from the Audit reports noted that there should be an improved recovery process which included digital tracking and shared monitoring with universities.

4.2 Discussion

The findings show that privatisation in Zambia's public universities does not operate as a comprehensive or uniform reform. Instead, it appears as a series of selective practices introduced in response to persistent financial pressure, restrictive policy conditions and limited organisational capacity. This pattern is consistent with research across sub-Saharan Africa, where universities adopt market-influenced practices to ease financial constraints while continuing to operate within public accountability structures established by government ministries and regulatory bodies (Teferra, 2017; Woldegiorgis, & Doevenspeck, 2013; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). This reflects what Neave (1998) describes as the "evaluative state," where governments reduce direct financial support while strengthening regulatory control. The discussion below examines how these dynamics shape institutional behaviour and how they inform the development of the RATUS Framework.

4.2.1 Privatisation as a Selective and Adaptive Reform

The study found that stakeholders view privatisation not as a formal strategy but as an adaptive measure to address budgetary gaps. Institutions have introduced cost-recovery programmes, professional short courses, facility rentals and postgraduate programmes to raise additional revenue. However, each initiative must comply with existing statutes and obtain ministerial approval before implementation. This positions privatisation as an institutional response shaped by necessity rather than deliberate policy direction. Similar patterns appear in Ghana and Tanzania, where public universities engage in income-generating activities to support operations while continuing to rely on government allocations as their primary funding source (Materu, 2007). In Zambia, privatisation remains conditional, regulated and shaped by administrative structures that safeguard public accountability. This supports the argument by Teferra and Altbach (2004) that African universities adopt entrepreneurial practices cautiously due to continued state steering and accountability obligations.

4.2.2 Governance, Accountability and Limited Autonomy

Governance arrangements in Zambia's public universities demonstrate a clear separation between internal management and government control. Although universities exercise control over routine administration, major decisions such as senior appointments, financial commitments, tuition adjustments and procurement exceptions require authorisation from the Ministry of Education. This system strengthens accountability but reduces the speed at which institutions can act. Comparable outcomes are observed in South Africa and Kenya, where decentralisation reforms introduced formal autonomy while retaining strong state involvement in critical areas (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2013). This arrangement aligns with what De Boer, et al (2007) conceptualise as "regulated autonomy," in which institutions are granted formal decision-making powers but remain substantively constrained by state control mechanisms. Similar mixed governance configurations have been identified in comparative higher education systems undergoing managerial reform (Maassen & Olsen, n.d.).

Participants in this study acknowledged the importance of regulatory control in protecting public resources. Still, they expressed concern that prolonged approval processes weaken competitiveness, delay critical actions and reduce institutions' ability to respond dynamically to academic and financial needs. This tension reflects Bovens' (2007) accountability framework, which explains how mechanisms designed to enhance transparency and answerability can simultaneously generate procedural rigidity. It also resonates with Christensen and Lægheid's (2011) argument that public management reforms often produce mixed governance systems combining managerial autonomy with intensified control.

4.2.3 Financial Management and the Quest for Stability

Financial conditions were identified as the strongest influence on institutional behaviour. All universities reported declining government grants, rising salary obligations, postponed capital projects and delayed operating funds. These challenges force institutions to rely on tuition, which must be approved by the ministry and is shaped by political

considerations of affordability. The result is a recurring funding gap that slows development, reduces staff morale and affects service quality. Interviews and financial records indicated that universities are attempting to adopt stricter budgeting and expenditure controls. However, these measures tend to focus on short-term cost containment rather than long-term financial strategy. Regional comparisons from Uganda, Kenya and Mozambique show similar conditions, with institutions creating income-generating activities that contribute modestly yet rarely produce full financial resilience (Teferra, 2019; Teferra & Altbach, 2004; Cloete et al., 2015). The Zambian case reflects this broader regional pattern. This confirms Christensen and Læg Reid's (2011) observation that fiscal decentralisation in public institutions often shifts financial responsibility without transferring sufficient decision-making authority to secure long-term sustainability.

4.2.4 Regulatory Complexity and Policy Fragmentation

The study revealed that multiple legislative instruments, the Higher Education Act, the Public Financial Management Act and the Public Procurement Act, create overlapping requirements that are not always fully aligned. Although each law addresses an important element of governance, financial discipline or procurement control, their combined effect creates complexity for institutions attempting to manage day-to-day operations. Participants noted that regulations from different government agencies sometimes conflicted, resulting in uncertainty about procedures and priorities. Document analysis showed that internal university statutes often reproduce national laws without developing institution-specific guidance. As a result, institutions experience delays in recruitment, limited procurement flexibility, inconsistent reporting practices and interruptions in financial decision-making. These challenges reflect conditions across several African public universities, where administrative frameworks inherited from the public sector often limit the strategic capacity of higher education institutions. This layered governance environment reflects Neave's (1998) analysis of expanding state evaluation and De Boer et al.'s (2007) findings on multi-level control systems in higher education governance.

4.2.5 Emerging Pathways for Reform

Despite multiple constraints, the study found evidence of gradual institutional adaptation. Universities have begun forming targeted partnerships with government agencies, private organisations and industry. They are identifying specialised postgraduate programmes that attract working professionals, improving internal financial controls, expanding digital systems for management and initiating community-based projects that provide both academic and financial value. These efforts indicate that institutions are attempting to build resilience within the constraints of existing statutes.

However, transformation of this kind requires supportive conditions. Institutions need clearer definitions of their decision-making authority, coordinated policy direction across regulatory bodies, strengthened financial management skills and a broader understanding of governance among senior managers. These needs informed the development of the RATUS Framework, which offers a structured approach to integrating regulation, autonomy, institutional initiative and financial planning into a coherent pathway for improving sustainability. This supports Bovens' (2007) position that accountability must be structured in ways that enhance rather than constrain institutional performance and aligns with Christensen and Læg Reid's (2011) argument that reform effectiveness depends on balancing autonomy and control.

4.2.6 The RATUS Framework

The findings show that regulation is still necessary, but it must be realistic and suited to what institutions can manage. It should also be guided by ethical responsibility, ensuring decisions support both accountability and fairness. Traditional public administration approaches this differently, focusing on strict rules, centralised control and compliance (Neave, 1998; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2011). While this can help protect public resources, it often reduces flexibility and makes it harder for universities to innovate or respond quickly to change.

The RATUS Framework takes a more balanced approach, encouraging the coexistence of regulation and autonomy. Rather than seeing them as opposites, it recognises that each plays a vital role in effective governance. Regulation can provide direction and control, while autonomy gives universities the room to make decisions that fit their specific contexts. This resonates strongly with De Boer et al.'s (2007) notion of regulated autonomy and with Teferra and Altbach's (2004) argument that African higher education reform requires carefully balanced state steering rather than complete deregulation.

The study therefore, suggests that the most effective system is one in which the state and universities work together rather than pull in different directions. In the long run, sustainable higher education depends on coordinated governance, adaptable leadership and a shared commitment to responsibility from both government and institutions.

4.2.7 Conceptual Diagram of the RATUS Framework

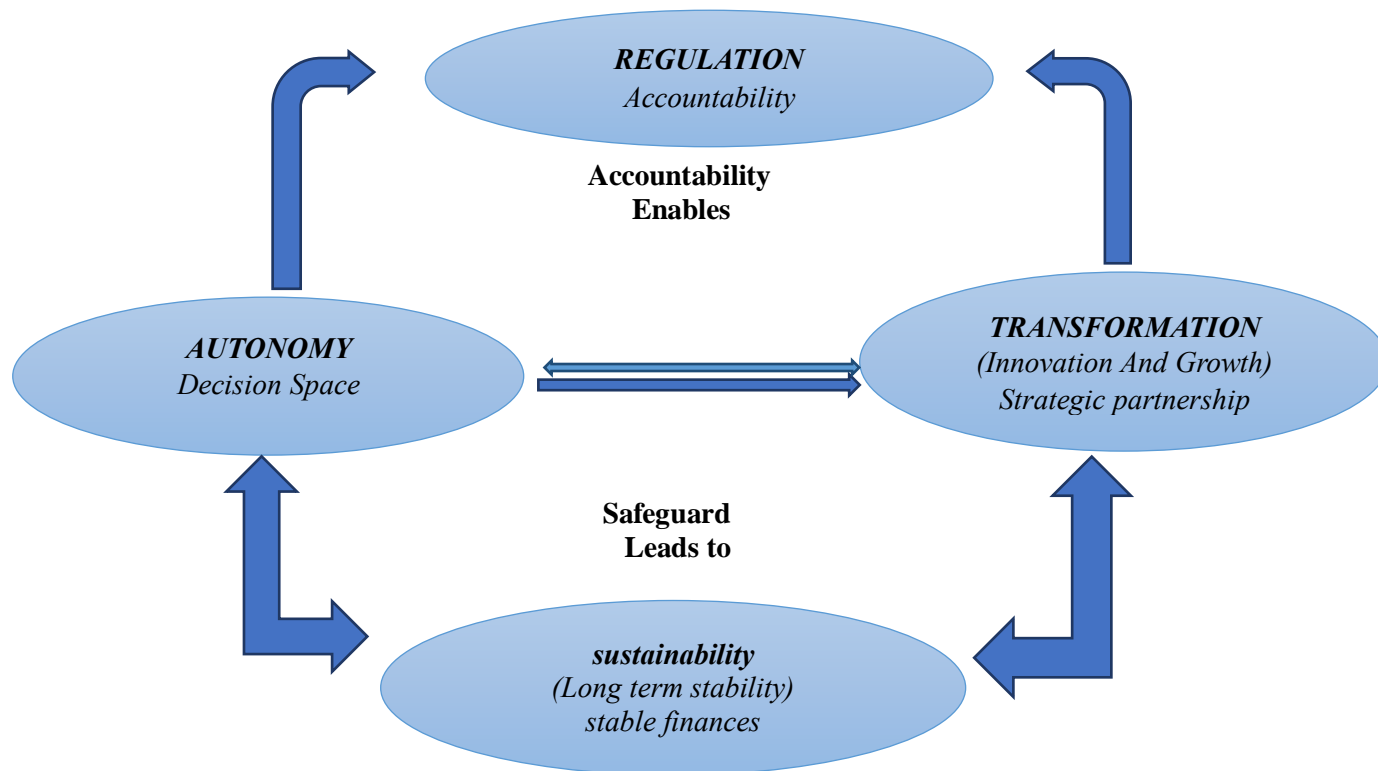


Figure 1
The RATUS Framework

This diagram presents the RATUS Framework, which illustrates the dynamic relationships among regulation, autonomy, transformation and sustainability in Zambia’s public universities. Regulation, grounded in accountability, provides the institutional boundaries within which universities operate. Within these boundaries, autonomy creates a structured decision space that allows institutions to make academic and financial decisions. Autonomy interacts directly with transformation, where innovation, strategic partnerships and growth initiatives take place. These processes safeguard sustainability, reflected in long-term stability and stable finances. Importantly, sustainability reinforces regulatory accountability, creating a continuous and balanced cycle. The framework therefore demonstrates that sustainable reform does not result from deregulation alone, but from the coordinated interaction between governance control, institutional decision space and strategic transformation.

4.2.8 Summary Tables

Table 2
Summary of Key Themes

Cluster	Theme	Description
Interpretations	1–5	Selective adoption of privatisation; conditional autonomy; partial diversification
Governance & Finance	6–10	Budget constraints, cautious expenditure, controlled fee setting, statutory governance
Systemic Reform	11–15	Policy fragmentation, growing partnerships, dependence on student loan scheme

**Table 3***Policy Implications Derived from the RATUS Framework*

Area	Implication
Governance	Need for aligned statutory and institutional frameworks
Finance	Need for greater operational discretion and capacity building
Human Resources	Recruitment must shift from administrative to strategic orientation
Policy	Clearer distinction of authority between ministries and councils
Partnerships	Structured guidance required to support engagement with private actors

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how governance arrangements, accountability requirements and the degree of institutional autonomy influence financial sustainability in Zambia's public universities. Drawing on interview data from senior university administrators and government officials, supported by statutory and institutional documents, the findings revealed that privatisation does not operate as a formal national policy but rather as a selective response to ongoing financial constraints and administrative requirements. Universities have adopted several income-generating activities, yet these remain limited in scale due to extensive regulatory conditions, restricted decision authority and prolonged approval procedures.

The study shows that governance structures are shaped by national legislation that prioritises accountability through ministerial and statutory regulation. This arrangement safeguards public resources but reduces the ability of institutions to respond quickly to financial and academic demands. Autonomy exists mainly in routine administrative functions, with significant policy and financial decisions requiring government endorsement. Financial records and interviews confirm that public universities continue to depend heavily on government grants, which remain insufficient to support long-term development. This condition, combined with weak diversification initiatives and restricted space for strategic planning, affects the financial stability of institutions. Policy fragmentation further contributes to these challenges. Universities are required to comply with multiple regulatory instruments such as the Higher Education Act, Public Financial Management Act, and Public Procurement Act that do not always align. These inconsistencies limit institutional discretion and slow administrative processes. Despite these constraints, the study identified emerging efforts among universities to strengthen financial controls, engage in targeted partnerships, expand postgraduate programmes and adopt digital systems to improve efficiency.

To address these complex realities, the study developed the Regulated Autonomy for Transformative University Sustainability (RATUS) Framework, which provides a structured explanation of how regulation, autonomy, transformation and sustainability interact. The framework offers a context-specific model that can guide universities and policymakers in aligning governance practices with financial strategies. It also provides a practical tool for institutional assessment, policy review and long-term planning. Therefore, Zambia's public universities operate within conditions that require a careful balance between state responsibility and institutional initiative. Strengthening this balance will demand clearer policy direction, improved governance capacity, coordinated regulatory supervision and strategic financial planning. The RATUS Framework provides a foundation for such efforts and offers a pathway toward building stronger, more resilient public universities.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and the RATUS Framework, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, university councils and institutional leadership. Legislative reforms are needed to clarify areas of decision authority for public universities. Current laws grant autonomy in principle but limit its practical application through extensive approval requirements. Amendments to the Higher Education Act and related statutes should provide clearer boundaries between ministerial supervision and institutional decision-making. This would reduce administrative delays and create space for universities to implement context-specific strategies as they maintain accountability. Financial capacity must be strengthened across institutions. Many administrators operate under significant pressure due to limited budgeting skills, restricted forecasting tools and an absence of strategic investment planning. Targeted training for financial managers, particularly in budgeting, forecasting and revenue development, would help institutions move beyond basic cost control toward planned growth. Improved financial literacy among senior managers can enhance institutional preparation for long-term sustainability.

Human-resource management should transition toward strategic planning rather than reactive hiring. Institutions frequently delay recruitment due to fiscal constraints and approval processes, which affects teaching quality and administrative efficiency. Workforce planning should be integrated into institutional strategic plans so that staffing

decisions reflect academic needs and financial capacity. Coordination among regulatory bodies should be improved. Multiple ministries and agencies issue guidelines that often conflict, creating confusion and slowing institutional processes. A national coordination platform involving the Ministry of Education, Higher Education Authority and Public Service Management Division would help streamline regulations, harmonise expectations and reduce administrative burden. This would also enhance communication and policy consistency.

Universities should expand income-generating initiatives beyond tuition. Although many institutions operate short courses or consultancy programmes, these remain small in scope due to limited guidance. Clear national guidelines for partnerships, research services and industry collaboration would help institutions pursue sustainable ventures. Institutions should also identify niche postgraduate programmes that meet national priority areas. The national student loan system should be modernised to address delays in disbursement and weak repayment mechanisms. Improved digital tracking, automated communication and institutional involvement in monitoring repayments can reduce funding gaps. Expanding loan coverage would support enrolment growth and improve financial predictability for universities.

The RATUS Framework should be adopted as a reference tool for institutional evaluation, policy review and strategic planning. Its four elements which is regulation, autonomy, transformation and sustainability provide clear indicators that can guide decision-making at institutional and national levels. Embedding the framework in training programmes, audits and strategic planning exercises would support more coherent and stable development across Zambia's public universities.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

I declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited capacity to assist with language refinement, grammar checking and formatting. All conceptual development, data collection, analysis, interpretation of findings and framework development are my original work. The use of AI did not replace critical thinking, data analysis or independent scholarly judgment.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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